NOSLEEP EBOOK

2014 - ISSUE 1

Front Matter

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The eBook is compiled by /u/EtTuTortilla. You can read his work at The Brass Wyrm, Filmalogical, /u/DylanTJefferson, and /u/OsoBrazos.

Congratulations to /u/DrawsACartoon, who won the nosleep eBook Cover Art Contest for this issue. You can view other great work by this artist at his DeviantArt page.

/u/Vonboone also submitted an amazing work to the contest, which is used as the back cover for this issue. You can see more of this artist's work at Vonboone's DeviantArt page.

January 2014

Betsy the Doll

The_Dalek_Emperor

Winner - January 2014 Monthly Contest

Like most people, I had a depressing childhood. Who doesn't, these days? My father left before I was born and my mother was high on drugs from the day she brought me home. She slipped right back into her party lifestyle and turned our small apartment into an opium den. For the first five years of my life, I walked around in a drug-fueled, blurry haze. The smoky air would flood down the hallway from the living room and slip under my bedroom door. It seemed to linger for days.

My mother wasn't a bad person, just a victim of her addictions. When she did have spare money, she would put food in the house or buy me clothes from Goodwill. The only pieces of furniture I had in my bedroom were a box spring and mattress set and a little blue and white toy chest. Not that I had a lot of toys to put in it, just the 3 I had gotten for birthdays: one was an art kit, one was a red wagon, and the last, my pride and joy, was a doll named Betsy.

Betsy was my best friend. We would have imaginary tea parties together, sleep together, take baths together and, sometimes, I think I even remember her speaking to me.

Thinking back on Betsy in adulthood has made me realize just how severely traumatized I was as a child. I was so often high on opium that my memories are extremely unreliable. Really, a talking doll? Still, I remember the sound of her voice, a high-pitched, tinkled lilt. And I remember the things she wanted me to do. Steal food for her. Bring her forks and knives. Hit the bad man who slept on our couch... Always bad things that would get me in trouble. I would blame it on Betsy but my mother would never believe me. Adults never do.

Around my 6th birthday I asked my mother for a birthday party. I wanted to invite the not-nice girls from school, serve them cake, make them like me. I still remember standing in the kitchen with such high hopes, a glass bottle of soda shaking in my hand as I held my breath and awaited my mother's answer. She turned to me and laughed.

"A birthday party? Laura, that's ridiculous. I can't afford to feed 15 other children that aren't even mine - I can barely afford to feed you! You eat like a elephant, or should I say little Betsy does. There's barely anything left for me to eat around here!"

My face fell as she shook her head, mumbled something and stumbled off. I heard the music go up in the living room as more people walked in the door. Some left, some stayed; I never knew any of them. My mother threw parties all the time. What about me? I was a kid! All my friends had birthday parties and now the mean girls would know I was too poor to have one and they would tease me even more.

I felt tears start to swell and I ran into my room and slammed the door. Betsy was laying on the bed

and smiling. She was always smiling, how could I forget. Just staring at me, smiling. She was going to tell me to do something bad. Like steal again or worse. This was her fault. Betsy didn't have to go to school. Betsy never got in trouble like I did. And in my 5 year old mind, I truly believed it was the doll, not my mother, who was to blame for everything.

I screamed in indignant rage and threw the bottle as hard as I could at the bed. It hit Betsy and she fell on the floor. I picked up the bottle and hit her again and again. I tore her dress as I continued to punish her. Then I laughed. I dragged Betsy to my toy chest and threw her in. I slammed it shut and kicked the chest against the wall; I never wanted to see Betsy again.

I never owned another doll after that. About a week later the police came and two nice ladies took me to live in a new home in a new state, with food and toys and no drugs. The trunk went into storage and the wagon disappeared. I never saw my mother again. As I got older my foster parents admitted she was in jail, doing 25 years. I felt nothing for her anyway, I was still having nightmares because of the life she had given me. I focused on doing well in school and ignored her letters from prison. She reached out to me several times in my teens but I always declined her calls.

That is, until this morning. I am 30 now, with my own children and a husband who loves me deeply. I have a beautiful house, two dogs and a career as a social worker trying to make a difference for kids who had it bad like me. So when I got a voicemail from my mother letting me know she had been paroled and wished to speak, I felt stable enough to let her say her piece.

Since the kids were home from school I went out into our shed in the backyard to return my mother's call. The shed was the children's domain and they used it to play in the summer. I sat on my old toy chest which was currently being used as tea party table and dialed the number she had left me.

Three rings.

"Hello? Laura?"

"Hello, mother. How are you?"

"Oh Laura, thank you for speaking to me. I know you have your own life now and a family. I would love to meet them someday! I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am. For everything."

"You are not meeting my kids - ever. Since you called me, I am going to say my piece.The opium, the heroin, they destroyed you, mother, and you almost took me down with you. Honestly, I am surprised it took you so long to get caught."

"Caught? Laura, I know how it seems, but I honestly know nothing! Look, it hardly matters and I do understand why you would feel that way. Why you would hate me and not want me to meet your little ones. I learned a lot about Jesus and forgiveness while I was away and just...oh Laura, I am so sorry about Betsy."

"Betsy?" I paused, confused. "Why would you care about her?"

'I know, I know Laura, believe me I do. It was all my fault, the drugs, the partying. And Betsy, oh God, if I had only been able to see through the haze, if I had only known. She's gone and it's all my fault."

As my mother began to cry, I tapped my fingers on the toy box, impatiently. The drugs had clearly fried her brain.

"Mother, why are you talking about Betsy? Why do you even care? And I know where she is." Right

underneath me.

"What are you talking about, Laura? Oh God, where is she?!"

I shifted uncomfortably. "Well...Betsy's in the trunk."

I honestly thought she had hung up, I heard nothing on the other end, not even breathing for a moment.

".....What do you mean your sister's in the trunk?"

"My sister? What the hell are you talking about? Back on drugs so soon, mother? Betsy is a goddamn doll. I locked her in the toy box a few days before you got arrested for possession."

"Laura.. oh God no...no... Laura, I wasn't arrested because of the drugs, I was arrested because of Betsy's disappearance! You called her your little doll, but I thought you knew... Oh God, what did you do, Laura? What did you do to my baby?!"

Stunned, and with no emotion, I set the phone down next to me and stood up. I could hear the distant sound of my mother's anguished cries and feel the dark clutch of possibility in my own chest. Memories were stirring in the back of my mind, threatening to come flooding forward into my consciousness. Pushing against a door in my head, a door that had been locked so tightly for so long, I had forgotten it was there.

But...could the trauma and the opium have really led me to believe that a small child was actually doll? Begging for food, asking for utensils to eat with, asking me to protect her from the bad man?

No...

I slowly turned around and brought my eyes down to the chest. Surely, it was too small. You couldn't fit a person in there. You couldn't. But what about a very small, starving, emaciated child? What about her? Would an investigator even bother looking for a child in this chest? It was just too small...

I knelt down to the ground and opened the clasps. It would be better to not look. After all that I had overcome, this new life that I had earned. It could all be undone by opening this toy box. I shouldn't open it. I should throw it in a landfill and forget it ever existed. I should not look inside...

I opened the chest.

I never had a doll. My mother never could afford to buy me one. I never had a wagon either. But I did have a toy box. A pretty, blue and white toy box. And when I was five, I killed my two year old sister and put her in it. And now my life is over.

A Ouija Board is NOT a Good Idea...EVER

SaraSmile416

First Part of a Series

I'm that asshole... You know, that asshole who moves the pointer while playing with a Ouija Board. I don't know why - I guess I just liked knowing I was the one responsible for scaring the shit out of people instead of something or someone I couldn't see. Or maybe I just didn't believe that a commercially made product could "talk" to ghosts. Who knows? But, I as found out, Karma definitely is a bitch.

One night in college, a friend of mine was over and we were studying. One of those ghost shows came on the tv and they were messing around with a Ouija Board. My friend, Liz, said offhandedly to me, "You know, I've never played with one of those." I was definitely surprised. Ouija Boards were such a staple of my childhood - hundreds of "sleepovers" with me scaring the crap out of little girls by the moving the pointer on the board and that whole "light as a feather, stiff as a board" thing. I couldn't fathom someone growing up and not experiencing it. I started talking about random "experiences" I've had with the board and tried to convince her it would be a good idea to run out to WalMart and buy one. Finally, I was successful and off we went, our studies abandoned on the table. College priorities at it's finest, I guess.

After our Walmart trip, we got back to my apartment and opened the box. We spared no expense - it was the "Glow In The Dark Special Edition." Talk about class. Liz looked like she was about to piss her pants as I explained how to put your fingers on the pointer. We lit some candles and turned off all the lights.

"Ok, so just ask whatever," I said, secretly smirking,

"Like what?" She asked.

"I don't know. Something fun, like 'when am I going to die' or something." This was always one of my favorite questions for people to ask because, while pushing the pointer, I could really freak them out.

"I don't want to know that!"

Damn. I was a bit disappointed, but went with it. I suggested just trying to "open our minds" and see who would come through. I was already planning to have JFK come through - not many of my friends know I am a huge JFK buff so I can usually creep them out with the amount of knowledge "the ghost of JFK" knows about his assassination and whatnot.

We put our fingers on the pointer and nothing happened. I was letting the tension grow before I started my pushing. It's always better to start slow!

All of a sudden, the pointer started to move... and I wasn't pushing it for once.

"You can't push it," I yelled at her. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. I didn't want her to ruin my plan.

"I'm not!" Liz shouted back.

"Well, obviously you are 'cause I'm not!"

"Aren't the ghosts supposed to move it?" She asked.

I guess she got me there. I just sat back, shut up, and watched the pointer move. I was convinced she was moving it. She had to be. There was no way a ghost was communicating with us through a glow in the dark "spirit board" that I bought for $17.99 at WalMart.

After a few minutes, we finally got a message: I-M-I-S-S-U-L-I-Z.

Liz was, understandably, a bit freaked out that the "spirit" knew her name. I was too, but I kept telling myself she was moving it, whether it be subconsciously or not. We kept going.

I-N-E-D-2-S-E-E-U-G-A-I-N-S-O-O-N.

"I need to see you again soon? What does that mean?!" Liz asked, getting more and more freaked out.

"I don't know," I said, and honestly meant what I said. I had no idea what was going on. I hate to admit it, but I was starting to get freaked out. The Ouija Board NEVER worked for me before.

"You're moving it!" she yelled.

"No, I'm not, I swear!" and I did swear. I wasn't moving it for once in my life.

"Yes, you are!"

She keep insisting I was moving it, but we kept going. The pointer stopped moving for a few minutes. I was intrigued, yet scared - I wanted to see what else it would do, but I was afraid of what I'd find out. Finally, getting a bit impatient, I asked the first question of the night: "Who is this? What do you want?"

I-A-M-W-I-L-L-[HELLO]-L-I-Z-I-S-T-I-L-L-O-V-E-U

Liz looked like she was going to lose her dinner all over the board. "Who's Will?" I asked.

"Seriously... are you moving it?" Liz responded in a thin whisper.

"No, I told you I wasn't. Who's Will?"

"He's my ex-boyfriend who killed himself after we broke up. Really, are you moving it? Because this isn't funny."

I tried to convince her that I wasn't, but she didn't believe me. She just sat there looking like, excuse the pun, she had just seen a ghost. I suggested we quit. "Listen, Liz, obviously this is upsetting to you. Let's just stop now and--"

"No, I need to know if he's ok," she said with a determined look on her face. "But I have to make sure it's not just you pushing it and fucking with me."

After a bit of discussion, we decided that I would keep my fingers on the pointer, but keep my head down and not look. That way, I wouldn't know where to push it. I agreed and sat there, feeling more and more uneasy. I put my head down and closed my eyes, trying to focus all of my energy or whatever the hell Ghost Will needed to, maybe, bring some closure to Liz.

After about a minute of sitting there with my head down and eyes closed, I started to go cold all over. It was unlike any other feeling of cold I have had. The only way to describe it is that my bones were cold and it was chilling me from the inside out. I tried to brush it off - maybe there was a draft coming in from the cool spring air outside. Then, without warning, my head, for lack of a better term, exploded with all of these gruesome images I couldn't control. It was as if any single irrational or

rational fear I had throughout the course of my life multiplied its intensity by a thousand and slammed into my brain at the same time. It only seemed to last for a second and a year at the same time, but, regardless of however long it was, every single image was burned into my head. I jerked away from the table, trying not to scream.

"What's wrong?" Liz asked, smiling at me. What the fuck was she smiling about?

"I don't know what--why are you smiling?! What the fuck is so funny?" I could barely contain myself. Deep down, I knew I was acting crazy, but I couldn't help it.

"Nothing's funny. I'm just smiling because I had the nicest conversation with Will. He doesn't blame me!"

"What the hell do you mean?" I snapped again. "It's only been like a fucking minute since we started."

Liz's face scrunched up in confusion. "What do you mean? I've been talking to Will for the last 2 hours..."

What. The. Fuck.

Needless to say, I was a bit creeped out. Ok, more than creeped out. I was terrified. I threw that damn board back in the box as quick as I could and blew out all of the candles. I shoved the box into the closet as far back as it could go - I didn't want to look at it anymore. I announced abruptly that I was going to drive Liz home and opened the door, trying to hurry her. It was definitely out of character. She obliged, however, and we got into the car.

The whole 5 minute drive seemed like an eternity. I could swear I'd see things on the side of the road but, at second glance, they weren't there. Images I had seen of my baby sister mutilated and whatnot from that weird trance-like dream I had started to shimmer in the corners of my eyes. I swerved about a million times, thinking I was going to hit one of these "things" but nothing was there. By the time we got to her apartment, Liz looked at me like I was crazy.

"Are you sure you're ok?" She asked.

"Yeah, just get out of the damn car already," I snapped back at her, almost surprising myself with how mean I was being. Though I fully admit to fucking with people while using Ouija Boards, I really am a nice person. I swear!

Liz did as I asked and I sped away, eager to get to the "safety" of my apartment.

When I opened the door, I noticed 2 things right away - it was about 30 degrees in the apartment and all of the blinds and curtains were wide open. I was confused but I tried not to let my mind wander. I shut all of the curtains and cranked the heat - it was April so it wasn't freezing outside, but it wasn't hot either. Normal spring time weather.

After shutting all of the blinds and whatnot, I sat on the couch and tried to turn on the lamp. The light went on and then popped off. I again tried to shake it off as a shitty coincidence. I changed the light bulb and went to turn it on again. POP. Out again. I went to go turn on the overhead light instead. POP. All three bulbs popped off at the same time. At about this point, I was basically pissing my pants I was so scared... but I tried to remain as calm as I could. It wasn't easy, let me tell you.

I grabbed as many blankets as I could and sat on the couch in the (dark) living room. I was going to light the candles we had used when we used the board, but I didn't want anything related to that

fucking thing around me. I turned on the television and blared it, hoping that I could just attribute any noise and flash of something in the corner of my eyes to the television. You know you've done it too.

Unfortunately, it didn't work. I was just starting to doze off when this loud beeping woke me up. It sounded like the worst alarm clock ever. It was coming from the closet where I had thrown the Ouija Board. I slowly went over and opened the door... out fell an old alarm clock (I think it was my roommate's... I hope it was my roommate's...) blaring uncontrolably. I hurriedly shut the door so the Ouija Board would stay in there and I started looking at the clock to turn it off... Not only were there no batteries in it nor was it plugged in anywhere, but the time flashing on the clock was 4:16am. My birthday (hence the user name).

What the fuck?!

Needless to say, I threw that thing quite far and it broke into a million little pieces.

I wish it stopped there. I really do. But, little did I know, that was just the warm up so to say... the "opening act" to a three act shit show that has become my life.

I have to go to work right now, or I would tell you more... though I hope this is enough to convince EVERYONE never ever ever fuck with a Ouija Board.

EDIT I just put up "Part II" here. This initial Ouija Board session was just the start of all kinds of crazy shit... But I'd like to thank everyone who is reading this - it's very relieving to be able to finally tell SOMEONE this story without fear of being 302'd. I appreciate it :)

A Man Brought My Family Kool-Aid, and I Think My Wife Just Killed Our Baby.

SoWrongKoolAid

First Part of a Series

Hey guys. I, um... I made a throwaway for this. I know this subreddit pretty well, and at this point I think you're the only ones that may be able to help me (or won't call me crazy). I think my wife may have just killed our baby. I'm hoping by the time I share this with you guys, someone may know what I can do to save him. And to save her as well, but I think it may be too late for her.

Let me back up. I have a son, Jack, who is six years old. My wife Sandra and I also have a new baby boy, Steven, who is four months old. School was canceled for Jack yesterday due to the cold weather (I live in Minnesota), and my wife stayed home with them. When I got home yesterday, I noticed my wife was acting a bit...strange. I don't really know how to describe it. She kept talking about this amazing dinner that she cooked, describing the juices and the spices of the steak, all the while licking her lips. I mean, I've seen her hungry before, but she was practically drooling onto the floor.

I followed her to the kitchen where Jack was sitting at the table, playing with his Star Wars Lego set that I bought him for Christmas. I gave him a big hug and kissed the top of his head. My wife wasn't kidding - the food she was cooking smelled incredible. I opened the refrigerator to grab a beer, but right in the middle on the bottom shelf was this gallon jug of what looked like green Kool-aid, but really cloudy.

"What's this, honey?" I grabbed the handle and pulled it out of the fridge.

"Sammy gave it to me!" Jack jumped up from the table and smiled at me. "He said it's happy juice!" I peered over at my wife and mouthed the name. Sammy? She just nodded at me and smiled.

"Who is Sammy, Jack?"

"He's my new friend! He rang the door and gave me that, told me it was happy juice! That it makes anyone who drinks it happy!" The grin on his face was huge. What in the world?

"Did that actually happen?" I asked Sandra. Again, she just nodded at me and smiled. "I'm pouring this out, that's not okay." I unscrewed the top, moved over to the sink and began pouring it out. It actually smelled pretty good as I poured it out. Had my wife not just told me a stranger gave it to my son, I may have taken a sip.

"You don't have to pour that out, you know." Sandra said to me as I held the jug upside down. She licked her lips as she watched the green fluid spill out into the sink.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said. "I'm getting rid of this." That's when the doorbell rang.

I finished pouring out the juice, screwed the top back onto the jug, then made my way to the door and opened it. A slender man in a brown suit and matching fedora stood on my front porch. He had a name tag that read "Sam".

"You must be Jack's father," he said to me as he reached out his hand.

"You're the guy that gave my son the Kool-aid?"

"Why, yes! Well, it's not Kool-aid, but it is similar, and tastes much better!"

"Get off my property, or I'm calling the police." I began to shut the door, but he placed his shoe right in front of it, preventing it from closing.

"Sir, I just wanted to know how you enjoyed it. We received reports that someone in this household drank quite a bit."

"How did you -" I began, but my wife cut me off, running up from behind me.

"Sammy! That drink! Oh my god, that drink was incredible!" That's when I slammed the door in his god damn face. I had no idea what was going on, but the last thing I wanted to do was continue talking to him. Sandra and I argued about what happened last night, but none of that is important right now. All I know is that neither Jack nor Steven had any of that godforsaken drink last night.

I told Sandra not to accept any more drinks from that man, and if he came by again I told her to call the cops, or at the very least to call me. Reluctantly, she agreed. For the rest of the night, she licked her lips. At the time I thought they were just really chapped.

So that was all last night. This morning I went to work, but I couldn't get anything done with everything that happened. Later in the afternoon, I eventually gave up, told my boss that I was sick and went home. When I got home, my wife was sitting in the family room by herself, and I could hear Steven upstairs crying. She was sitting there crying as well, but the thing that really terrified me was the blood coming from her mouth. Well, the blood wasn't coming from her mouth, but rather from her lips, like she accidentally bit into them.

"Jesus, Sandra, are you okay?" The blood was fresh at this point, so I grabbed a cloth from the kitchen and wiped it from her face. Right after I wiped it off, she proceeded to tuck her lower lip into her mouth and bit down. Hard. I grabbed her jaw and pried it open, but the damage was already done. More blood began to flow from her lips, holes created from her canines dragging through the tissue. She started to moan as if she wasenjoying it.

I had no idea what to do at this point. I forced some pain medication down her throat and tied a cloth around her mouth so she wouldn't bite down anymore, then carried her up to our bed. After she passed out (from the pain meds or from something else, I don't know), I went downstairs and called 911. She needed help that I was not capable of giving her. After a few minutes of pacing the kitchen, the doorbell finally rang.

That fucking man was standing at my doorway again. "What did you do to my wife you piece of shit!"

"Me?" he smiled, "I didn't do anything."

"Screw you."

"I thought you would be happier by now," he said to me.

"Excuse me?"

He looked down at a clipboard that he was holding. "We received reports that a second individual at this household consumed our beverage! Thought you would at least be smiling!"

Fuck.

I slammed the door and practically jumped up the stairs, sprinting toward Steven's room and swung open the door. My wife was standing over my baby's crib, whispering "Shhh, shhh, shhh...". She turned to look at me, the cloth gone from her face, as well as half of her lower lip. In one arm she held our child, our boy. Our Steven. In her other arm was his bottle, filled with a murky, green drink that Steven was gulping down.

That was all a few hours ago. I managed to talk her into putting him back into his crib, and I stayed with her until the ambulance arrived and took her to the hospital. I'm with Jack and Steven right now in the waiting room, contemplating if I should have them take a look at my baby, or if they'll think I'm crazy. I was hoping one of you guys would know who this Sam is, or what the hell my wife and my child have been fed.

Please, please, please help me save my child.

Edit (Saturday morning update): Per /u/Shezzam's advice, I told the doctors that Steven may have whatever Sandra has. He barely has any teeth right now, but just in case... in case he tries to bite his lip, I gave them his pacifier. I called my parents to watch Jack for me, so they picked him up from the hospital and took him back. I told them as little as possible, but they know Sandra is sick.

I went home to get that juice or whatever it is, and I couldn't find it. It was just...gone. Not in Steven's room, or Sandra's, or even the kitchen. I even double checked the sink to see if there was any left from where I poured it out. I'm guessing Sandra drank as much of that as she could, but it's all gone. I don't know what happened to the bottle.

I called the police and explained Sam to them. I didn't mention anything about his "records" or my wife's behavior, but at the very least, this man should not be going around giving that shit to families. The police want me to come in for a statement, so I have to go now. I still haven't slept yet, although I probably couldn't if I tried. Thank you all for the kind words and advice everyone, I knew this subreddit was the right place to ask. Please keep my family in your thoughts.

Edit 2: Update

Edit 3: Update #2

Trevor Didn't Have Autism

OsoBrazos

I've taken classes on this. In fact, I have a Master's Degree in Special Education, so I know what I'm about to say isn't exactly appropriate. But I'll say it anyway. I used to work with a weird kid. Frighteningly weird. Trevor's parents and teacher were convinced he was on the autism spectrum, possibly an Asperger's kid. I've worked with autists, though. I've been around savants and Asperger's kids and kids so far gone that all they can do is sit on their haunches and flap their hands. I know autism. Trevor didn't have autism. I don't know what he had, but he acted different. Somehow, he even felt different. I don't mean like the feeling you got talking to him or playing with him, I mean being around him felt…off somehow. It's hard to explain. My boyfriend doesn't get it. He thinks I'm nuts about this whole thing. I guess that's why I'm posting here.

Anyway, I worked in a special ed class with ten kids, but most of our time was spent broken into even smaller groups. I had Trevor and two other kids, the other aide had three, and the teacher had four. I honestly think they gave me Trevor when I started because I was new and they didn't want anything to do with him. He creeped them out. He creeped me out, at first, but so did the kid who threw up all the time. Eventually, Trevor became my buddy. We had actual conversations even though the aide and the teacher hadn't heard him say a single word before I was hired on. Trevor also used to have obedience problems but, once we developed a rapport, it seemed like I could get him to behave with the quickest of glances. He was a good little guy, even if he was really weird.

A few months into working with him, Trevor decided he wanted to know all about me. Every day at recess I would walk with him to a small oak tree he liked, and every day it was a new set of questions: where was I born, how old was I, what did I want to be when I was a kid, Avengers or X-Men? He remembered each answer and built off of them the next day, asking in his innocent, inquisitive, almost feline way. And then the questions got downright bizarre. One day Trevor asked if my arm still hurt from my car wreck. I've only ever been in one car wreck, a t-bone in high school. I dislocated my shoulder and totaled my car in that accident and, sometimes, my shoulder still bothered me. I was pretty sure I hadn't mentioned it in class, but not 100% so I let it slide.

The next day, again at his oak tree, Tevor asked me a question I knew for a fact I had't talked about in class. In fact, I had tried to not even think about the event for years.

"Why did Chris want to hurt you?"

Chris was a boyfriend from college. A boyfriend, a stupid mistake, a violent criminal, and a potential rapist. We met in a Psych survey course. He was a year older than me and he looked really good in a tank top, one of those smaller arm hole kind that shows off the muscles but keeps the hair under control. Ladies know what I'm talking about. Anyway, we went on a few dates before Chris suggested we watch Archer at his dorm room. I agreed, but Chris wanted to do more than watch TV. We made out a little but then I stopped it. Chris got really angry. I left. The next date went the same way. I figured it was typical horny guy hormones and he would calm down eventually. When he didn't, I broke up with him. That was when the trouble started. He started following me. One night I actually

called campus police to request an escort back to my dorm. Chris picked the lock one night and left flowers and a long poem on my couch. When I didn't call him, he broke in again and confronted me. I ended up with a broken rib, a cracked cheek bone, and a missing tooth. My roommate came home when Chris was unbuckling his belt and I was trying to stay conscious on my kitchen floor. I can never thank her enough for her perfect timing.

When Trevor asked me about Chris, it brought up a lot of things I didn't want to think about. Dark things. About what he did to me. About what I wanted to do to him.

"I don't know," I told Trevor.

He held my hand and looked at me. Almost through me. Then he said, "Sometimes there are bad people. I'm happy you're ok," and ran off to play with Duplos.

Like I said, he was a weird kid. And he didn't have autism. I don't know why, but that tiny, almost insignificant talk with Trevor took a weight off my shoulder that I didn't even realize I was carrying. But how had he known?

I pondered that for weeks until yesterday. Trevor was unusually quiet most of the day until we were walking to his oak tree at recess when he started crying. I asked what made him so sad. For a while he couldn't talk, but once he got his sobbing under control he said, "I won't see you again after today."

I freaked. This kid knew things about me that my boyfriend doesn't know, that my parents don't know. What did he know about the next day? Another car wreck? Was Chris out of prison and looking for me? I stayed home today with my doors locked and didn't do any driving at all.

At 2 PM I got a call from my school. There had been an accident. An old man had fallen asleep while driving and plowed through the field at recess time. Trevor was pulling leaves from his oak tree at the time. The car pinned him between the oak's trunk and the car's hood. He was dead before the paramedics arrived.

February 2014

A Warning to Those Thinking About Accessing the Shadow Web

keniluck
Winner - February 2014 Monthly Contest

How well do you know the Internet? Until two weeks ago, I thought I knew it pretty well. After all, I spend a good chunk of my day browsing Reddit and 4chan, and I'm always up-to-date with the latest memes and circle jerks. I've been a denizen of the internet since the early days of Fortune City pages and IRC channels, and a regular ever since.

Then, about a year ago, somebody introduced me to the "Shadow Web"—a sort of secret layer of the Internet that you will never find by Googling or looking up message boards. There are no "in links" from the surface web to the shadow web. And no, this isn't the "deepnet", in case you were thinking about that. Not some website with gore videos of freak accidents, I've seen those. I assure you this is something far more twisted.

I never asked what his name was. He was a regular who came to the gas station where I worked as an attendant last year. Every time he came in, he would buy $20 to $50 of UKASH vouchers, which I assumed were for porn subscriptions. I think it was a combination of his beige polo shirts and receding hairline that gave off the creepy vibe of a pervert.

One day, he asked for $300 of UKASH vouchers, and I made the mistake of raising the question: what for?

"Have you ever heard of the shadow web?" I remember him asking me casually as he counted $300 from a wad of twenty-dollar bills. I hadn't, so I shook my head. Then he looked through his wallet and withdrew a little slip, one about the size of a credit card. "If you want to find out," he whispered. He leaned towards me and slid the piece of paper into my chest pocket. I gave him his vouchers, he left, and I never saw him again.

Not long after, I left the job to return to school. It wasn't until a couple of weeks ago that I came across the old, yellowy uniform with the piece of paper still in the front pocket. When I opened it up and read its content, I immediately recalled my encounter with the creepy customer.

The piece of paper had instructions on how to get to the "gateway" of the shadow web. There were a lot of steps, some more sophisticated than others. Unfortunately, I was both tech-savvy and curious enough to follow them.

The first thing you'll want to know about this "shadow web" is that you do not want to go there. I've seen plenty of fucked up things on the web, but nothing comes remotely close to the things I saw on the SW. Thinking back, I should have noped the fuck out the instant I saw the front page. I don't know why I hadn't. Maybe something is wrong with me.

When I got to the "gateway page", which resembles one of those welcome pages that pops up when

you use the free Wi-fi at the airport or at the mall, the first thing I noticed was the word "Corpsefucking". It was underneath a search field among thirty or so other words which I assumed were the most commonly looked-up things on the SW, things like skinning and mutilation. That should have been my cue to X out.

There were a lot of other things, too, other than sexual content and graphic gore footage. Things like instructions on how to make DIY roadside bombs. Things like a craigslist for cannibals and people who wanted to be eaten by cannibals. Things like a marketplace to buy and sell stolen identities, either individually or in bulk.

I spent almost an hour reading up on leaked war documents and diplomatic cables on a site called avenge.shweb. The website looked very retro, if you know what I mean. The layout had frames and each frame had its own scroll bar. When I found myself clicking on links without thinking twice, I realized I had become comfortable on the shadow web.

Don't ask me how I came across this next website. Curiosity got the better part of me, and I clicked on things I shouldn't have. I'll spare you the actual name of site because I know some of you will make the same mistake that I did thinking it can't be that bad. It can.

When I got there, I noticed the UKASH logo at the bottom of the page, indicating that paid services were available. It was in fact a live webcam show, but you only paid if you wanted to be the director. Viewing was free. Beneath the live feed of a webcam was the log-in page to a chat room. It prompted me for a screen name when I clicked on the join button, so I entered asdfasdfg like I always do when commenting on pornhub or xvideos.

As soon as I got pass the log-in, a torrent of messages flooded the screen. Most of the messages were in English, a few were in Japanese, and I think some were Arabic or Farsi. The number of participants in the chat room fluctuated between 150-200 people, but that's only the number of people who bothered entering the chat. I suspect many more were watching anonymously. The majority of legible messages were "STARTTTTT" or "GOGOGO" or something to that effect.

After about a minute, a man with his face hidden behind a hockey mask appeared on the feed. I remember him having dark brown skin and being really skinny. Like, starving Ethiopian skinny. Shortly after that, everyone was set on mute—everyone except for one user by the name of italiangoat who I figured was the "director" of this show.

That's when the screaming began.

She was blindfolded and tied to a wooden chair with her hands behind her back. A bigger, darker man dragged her by the hair until she sat dead center on my screen. I watched her try to struggle free from the ropes, but she was so tightly fastened that you could see the bruising. God knows how long she had been tied up like that.

Finally, the bigger man took the blindfold off, and she stopped screaming. When she looked into the camera, she seemed to realize what was about to happen. She started crying and begging the two men in what I think was Arabic. Then a message popped up on the chat.

Italiangoat: lay her sideways on the floor

The director issued his first command. The skinny man saw the message and relayed it to the bigger man in their own language.

Italiangoat: kick her in the stomach.

The skinny man continued with his translations.

Italiangoat: kick her in the face.

The screaming got louder and louder. What the fuck was I watching? That was it for me. I reached for my cell phone, ready to dial 911.

Italiangoat: stomp on her tits.

Italiangoat: tell your friend to kick harder, I paid good money for this.

I was in so much shock at this point that I couldn't take my eyes off of the screen. The kicking went on for another ten, twenty, thirty seconds. It seemed as if it went on forever.

Italiangoat: now slit her throat.

When I read that last message, the churning feeling in my guts intensified. No, no, no, no, I kept thinking, somebody stop this. I tried to type into the chat, but the input field was greyed-out. The woman cried even louder when she heard the man relay the last request.

Italiangoat: wait, no, not yet.

The skinny man held one hand up to signal his partner to halt.

My breathing returned to normal for a second, thinking the woman was spared. At least for the time being. Then the director continued:

Italiangoat: take out her eyes first

The skinny man stared directly into the webcam. I couldn't see the entirety of his face, just his eyes and the small patch of skin around each one. In his eyes I searched desperately for the slightest hint of hesitation. Please, put a stop to this, I prayed, but I kept the mouse cursor hovered above the Close button in case they did not.

And then, the skinny man began typing, and a second screen name popped up on the log:

Admin: another $500

My mind froze when I saw the number. $500. This woman was being tortured and possibly killed for a meagre sum of $500. I was making as much every other week at the gas station, and I was barely making minimum wage. If I could offer $1000 to stop this, I would. I would empty out my savings account if it meant saving her life. I would, I swear on my life. I'd pay anything to stop this madness.

Italiangoat: OK.

I quickly shut off the screen before I could see any more. I wish my common sense could have kicked in earlier. I ran out to the yard where I regurgitated about two meals' worth of vomit. It had been a long time since I've felt this sick from watching something. When I was in junior high some friends showed me a clip from Rotten.com. It was the one where a man had his skull sliced in half by the rotor blades of a helicopter he was in the midst of repairing. And then, over the years, I've seen many more videos like that one—enough that I don't get the urge to puke in my mouth anymore. But let me tell you this: seeing a live footage of a real person being tortured is stomach-turning on a whole different level.

When I was done spitting out the last bits of bile in my mouth, I heard screaming coming from my

room. It was then I realized that in my haste to turn the monitor off, I had forgotten to turn the speakers off as well.

Her screams got worse and worse, until finally I was able to reach behind the desk and disconnect the speakers from the computer. The silence that followed was unbearable. It was as if by my own hands I had silenced her, killed her.

I felt remorse such as I have never felt before. I killed her, I thought to myself again and again. I KILLED her. The feeling was unreal.

I had to find out if she was alive. As I reached over to turn the screen back on, a voice inside my head begged me to stop. I do not want to see what I'm about to see.

But before I could stop myself, my hand had already acted. The image on the screen was an image I will never, ever forget.

The severed head of the woman sat there straight across from me, both eyes missing from their respective sockets. That face… that warped, misshapen face have haunted me ever since. Even now as I write this, I can feel her hollow eyes glaring at me from behind. I sleep with all the lights on, the TV on, but nothing helps.

Right before I shut down the browser and reconfigured the network settings to access the good ol' regular internet, I remember seeing one last line on the chat line. It read:

Admin: Thank you for watching. The next show will be in 1 hour.

Draw-A-Person

CoasterKid93

I had my first panic attack when I was thirteen years old.

To say it was a terrifying experience would be an understatement. For a brief and fleeting seven minutes of my life, the world around me dissolved into a trembling, dissociative mess. My heart nearly cracked my chest plate. My limbs shuttered and contorted. My eyes fogged and burned. My mouth turned to sandpaper. My lungs ripped away from my throat. I knew I was going to die. I knew I was going to die in the middle of my freshman English class. I knew I was going to die all because I forgot to print out my essay. I knew I was going to die because my parents were going to kill me. I knew I was going to die because everyone in that class knew that I was going insane.

At some point, all recollection of this event goes blank, and picks up an hour later on the exam table in the nurse's office.

While I survived with all limbs in tact, and only a few kids thought I was crazy, my parents killed me with their kindness. Of course my parents were worried, they had every right to be. But enrolling me in ten different assessment appointments with ten different therapists around town seemed a bit melodramatic. To be fair, my first panic attack was long overdue. For as long as I can remember, I was a needlessly anxious person. I stressed over every detail of every facet of life, no matter how insignificant or pointless.

Most of these sessions were identical in structure, and similar in their pointlessness.

"Tell me about yourself, Connor." "What happened before the panic attack?" "Connor, what did your panic attack feel like?" "Have you had a panic attack before?"

But one session in particular stood out to me.

When I sat down in front of the last therapist, she didn't bombard me with icebreakers and questions about my mental stability. She simply handed me a piece of paper and a pencil.

"Draw me a person," she said, "You can draw it however you like."

Being the final of my assessment appointments, and being annoyed beyond belief, I decided to have a little fun with it. My person, if you could call it a person, raised the eyebrow of my therapist as she scribbled down notes.

It was someone bound in a full-body straightjacket. Its limbs and features contorted into masses of crumbled cloth. Its head was hidden behind a mass of restraints. I was pleased with my work. I'm not sure if the therapist was.

Currently, five years later, my anxiety is now well under my control. Medication and learning to reverse my catastrophic thinking has made a world of difference. College has been great so far, as well. I've adjusted decently, and thanks to having a rare single room in the overcrowded freshman dorm hall, I have my own space to unwind at the end of the day.

However, something is beginning to go wrong. Horribly wrong. Five years later, I'm seeing that

drawing again. But it's not on paper anymore.

It first started a couple of weeks ago. I was late to an 8:00am Monday lecture, as usual, and I had to sprint across campus to make at least the last half of it. Apparently, everyone else was operating on the same schedule as I. When I ran into the academic hall where my lecture was being held, I missed the elevator to the forth floor. Not that being on time would have made a difference; the elevator easily exceeded its weight capacity.

I first saw it when the elevator doors slid closed. It didn't hit me what I had seen until I finally made it my lecture a few minutes later, but when it did, I wasn't sure if what I had seen was real. My drawing was lurching behind the crowd of anxious students. The only part of it I could see its head. It was wrapped in cloth. It was shaking uncontrollably.

As my professor's lecture drifted in one ear and out the other, I shook the event off as nothing more than jumbled nerves. It had already been a taxing day, after all.

But then I saw it again.

On Friday that same week, a friend and I had just sat down for our final lecture of the week. As per usual, we sat in the very back of the auditorium as to make a quick escape when class was over. About twenty minutes into the lecture, I heard something coming from behind the auditorium doors. It was coming from the entrance hallway. It sounded like scraping metal. It was quiet and almost unnoticeable at first. But then it grew louder. And louder.

The sound became so deafening that I could no longer hear the professor. As I pinned my fingers to my ears, I glanced around the lecture hall. People were still taking notes. The professor was still talking. My friend was frantically trying to keep up the pace of the presentation. No one noticed the sound. No one heard what I was hearing. My eardrums were on the verge of bursting. I gritted my teeth to hold back cries of pain.

The noise stopped.

I pulled my hands away from my ears. The professor was still discussing nineteenth century politics. My friend shook his writing hand in pain. My face flared with bewilderment. Did any of that really happen? Was I going crazy? Was-

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. My head jerked to the door nearest me. It was standing on the other side of the door. I could see it through the tiny window. It was twitching. Its locks and restraints were clamoring against its jacket. I bit into the sides of my cheek. The instinct to scream was rising up my throat like vomit.

It immediately turned to me. I jolted in my seat. It knew I was there. My friend poked me on the shoulder with his pencil.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Do you see it?" I replied.

My friend peered to the door for a brief second. Its locks were still jingling.

"No," he frowned, "What are you talking about?"

My heart sank. He couldn't see it.

"Nothing," I said.

A few minutes later, it disappeared. That was when I started to see it everywhere.

In the days following that Friday, I was certain my sanity was slipping away from me. I was seeing my drawing everywhere, and I could hear it wherever I went. I was being stalked. I could hear its ankle braces grinding against the sidewalk behind me as I'd walk to and from class. But whenever I'd turn around, I could only catch fleeting glimpses of it. Sometimes it would slide into a doorway. Other times, it would disappear behind a mass of students. But I knew it was always there. It was getting closer. Every day, I could hear it more clearly. I couldn't tell if any of it was real, or if my brain was boiling away inside of my head. My friends were beginning to catch onto it, as well. When I'd leave class with friends, or I'd go grab dinner with people from my floor, I'd find myself running. It was entirely on instinct. My body was yanking me away from certain danger. It earned me a lot of weird looks. I tried my best to brush it off as a joke, but I know that no one ever bought it. It became so bad that I scheduled an appointment with an on campus therapist.

But I never went to it, because last Thursday, it revealed itself to me for the first time.

I was walking through the campus green on my way to cafeteria to grab some breakfast before class. As if on cue, I heard the same sound that I had been hearing all week. I rubbed my eyes. I was growing exhausted. I wasn't sure how much more of this I could take. I stopped and turned around. For whatever reason, in the second I was turning around, some vague desire bubbled up from deep inside my mind. I wanted to see it, face to face. I was sick of running.

It was standing about twenty feet behind me, in plain sight. I froze. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move. One of its arms was coming loose from the restraint on its back. Its arm sagged free, and flailed limply to its side. I gagged. A revolting stench was emanating from a new tear along the left side of the straight jacket. It was acidic and ripe. After a dozen seconds of masking my eyes and nose from the odor, I saw something behind the ripped edges of cloth.

A face.

There was a face where one shouldn't have been. It was sideways and stuck onto the torso of the thing. Its flesh was cracked and dripping. I began to back away in horror. Other students walked by undisturbed. They couldn't see it. I was alone.

Its eyes snapped open and locked onto mine. Its lips curled into a smile

"It's your turn, Connor!" it spoke, "You're up next!" The voice was gelatinous and abyssal. As I took another step back, the thing raced towards me. I ran as fast as I could, pushing students out of the way and racing through buildings. It was gaining on me. Closer and closer. I could hear the restraints bursting and giving way. I needed to get back to my room. I couldn't let that thing get me.

"It's your turn, Connor!" it called out.

I turned around to catch a glimpse of it as I neared my dorm. The straight jacket was falling apart. And there were more faces. Dozens of them. All of them staring at me.

"YOU'RE NEXT," they screamed in unison.

I made it into the building. The elevator doors closed as it reached out to grab me. Its eyes were bulging with excitement. Its mouths were gaping in anticipation. It slammed against the metallic doors as I ascended away from death.

It began to laugh. Hundreds of voices began to laugh at once. It grew louder and louder. I collapsed into the corner of the elevator, grasping my ears and screaming in pain.

"YOU'RE NEXT, CONNOR," the voices howled. The laughing became worse when I reached my floor. My vision was beginning to blur. I could feel blood trickling from my ears. I stumbled into my door, and began fumbling my room key into the lock. My vision was going black. I could hear the locks and restraints clanking. It was coming upstairs. The key made its way into the lock, and I swung the door open and slammed it shut.

I locked the door, and the laughter stopped. My vision slowly returned to me. I gazed down at my hands. They were covered in blood. I slid down the door and sat against it. The tears came almost immediately, and before I knew it, I was crying harder than I had in a long time. I had never felt so alone. I had no way of knowing if any of this was actually happening, and I had no one to reach out to. No one would listen.

I remained locked in my room throughout the weekend. I left for nothing, and I never answered any phone calls or text messages. I didn't want to let people know that I was hiding. I couldn't let them know why I was hiding. My friend from lecture must have texted me half a dozen times when I didn't show up for class last Friday, and another half dozen times when I didn't respond. I was too afraid to answer them, because that thing was right outside my door.

All weekend long, it knocked at my door. "Connor?" the voices called, "Are you in there, Connor?" All weekend long, I could see its fingertips slide under my door as it tried to enter my room. "You can't stay in there forever," it would say. All weekend long, I would fear its flailing restraints hit against my door. "Remember, Connor," it laughed, "You're next!" All weekend long, I could hear people giggle and run up and down the hallways while that thing tapped at my door. I tried my best to ignore it. I had to keep telling myself it wasn't real, that I was going insane after all. Until my friend came to my room, that was the only thing that got me through the weekend.

On Monday morning, I was pulled out of a deep sleep by the sound of something pounding against my door. The last time I had slept was last Friday night, and my body wasn't about to go another day without shut-eye. At first, I thought it was that thing trying to get in again. Tough luck. I got up and gazed through the peephole. It was my friend from lecture. "Let me in, Connor," he said, "You're scaring the shit out of me." I obliged. A wave of relief washed over me. I didn't feel quite so alone, anymore.

"Jesus Christ," he said when he walked in, "What happened?"

I knew my room was a mess, but it didn't hit me how bad it really was until he walked in. When you're fighting to maintain your sanity, neatness comes second.

"I need to talk to you," I said, "It's bad."

"Of course," he replied, "What.."

His words trailed off from him. His eyes were glued on something on my bed.

"What is it?" I flinched.

"Dude, what the hell is this thing?" he asked.

It didn't notice it when I first woke up. The straightjacket had been neatly folded and placed at the

foot of my bed while I slept.

To Make It Beautiful

paintorpollen

Evienne was one of the most elegant people I knew. She was an artist and a friend of my mother's. Her hair was long and thick, and she'd hold it up in a painted barrette or a perfectly careless braid. She barely wore makeup, but was always dressed simply and beautifully. She spoke in a French accent that I found exotic. I used to wish that when I grew up I would be beautiful and graceful like Evienne.

She and my mother became friends when I was about twelve. She used to come over to cook with us and drink wine and tell stories. Sometimes she'd bring her boyfriend along, and I was always shy around him because he was so handsome.

Evienne would always pay special attention to me. She'd let me help her cook things, and she liked to teach me how to make little flowers out of cherry tomatoes or carrot peelings, or how to swirl sauce onto the plate with a spoon. Sometimes we'd make whole baked apples, one of my favorites, and she'd show me how to peel them with stripes or spirals so that they looked nice coming out of the oven.

"We will make it fancy, juuuust a little bit," she would always say, working the paring knife over the surface of an apple. "Just to make it beautiful." My mother always oohed and ahhed when we served our creations.

Nights when we had dinner with Evienne were alway lovely and warm. Sometimes she would come to our house, and sometimes we would visit her beautiful apartment just down the street. The conversation was engaging, and even though I was the only child I always felt included. Evienne would listen to my stories and laugh. She snuck me my first taste of wine. When I turned fourteen, she gave me a necklace that she'd made herself in her studio. It was beautiful.

As I grew, things changed. On a few of our dinner nights I started picking up on something. I'd see a dark expression flicker on Evienne's face when she looked at her boyfriend, or I'd notice that they'd arrive late and he'd stay off to the side, not laughing the way I was used to. Still, Evienne would make things with me. In fact, her little carvings were getting more and more elaborate, and they were always gorgeous. She really was a talented artist.

One night I heard Evienne and her boyfriend fighting outside in the driveway, and hearing her soft, kind voice raised in anger shook me so deeply I barely spoke for the rest of the evening. She tried to cheer me up by carving me an apple. She covered the whole thing in a pretty kind of filigree. I watched how deft she was with the little knife, building up a small heap of scraps as she went. "To make it beautiful," she told me, the way she used to, but I could see in her eyes that she was upset. My smile when she gave it to me was forced.

It was very unsettling for me, at that age, to see such a change in someone I admired. I turned the apple over and over in my hands, examining the complexity of Evienne's design. Usually she'd put something in the middle, like a heart or a bird, but this pattern swirled crazily across the surface with

no beginning or end. I could almost feel it pulling on me, like a current. Looking at it made me feel so strange that after she went home, I threw it in the garbage.

The next week, when Evienne came over, her boyfriend was not with her. She still had wine with my mother, and she still helped us make dinner, but she looked wilted, bent. I noticed how her cheekbones seemed to poke out a little bit more. She did not carve anything for me. "I was not enough for him, not enough" I heard her whisper when I stepped out of the room. My mother's hand was on her shoulder. When she went home, I thought I saw moisture in her eyes.

We didn't see her for a few weeks after that night, but one afternoon, my mother told me that we were going to Evienne's apartment. "She's been very sick," she said, "so we're going to bring her something to eat to help her feel better." I was carrying a loaf of bread wrapped in foil; my mother was carrying a glass dish of lasagna. I was walking ahead of her and so I reached Evienne's door first. I'd been worried about her and I was eager to see her. I wanted to help her so that everything could go back to normal. When I knocked there was no answer, but the door gave way slightly, and I pushed my way inside. Evienne's kitchen was dark.

There was a terrible smell. It was thick and sweet, rotten, dead. "Hello?" I called. In the next room I heard a shuffling sound. I shouldn't have, but I took a step in. "Evienne? It's Katy." On the table I noticed apples, each covered in intricate carvings, sagging and tilting as they rotted. Looking at the designs made me feel ill. As my eyes adjusted I realized that the patterns had been gouged into the wood of the tabletop, too, and into the wallpaper. They were everywhere. They didn't begin or end, they just went writhing across every surface.

Looking at them, I felt a sort of vertigo. As if they were moving around me. With a sort of fascinated horror, I ran my fingertips across some of the wall carvings. They were deep. How long had it taken her to do this?

I heard a rasping intake of breath and realized Evienne was right next to me, in the doorway of the kitchen. My heart dropped into my stomach. Even in the dim light I could tell that she looked worse than ever. She looked frail, her face seemed to have sunk inward and she was white as a sheet. Her long hair was disheveled and dirty and her dark dress clung damply to her body. She carried that terrible smell with her, like rotting fruit and old meat. She took a step towards me and I backed away.

She made a small noise like she was trying to speak, and as she did she stumbled a little bit, and threw out her hand to brace herself on the wall. Her sleeve fell away just enough that I could see the beginning of the patterns, on the back of her hand and her wrist, winding around and around down her arm. They were bleeding sluggishly, gouged deep just like the walls. I screamed for my mother.

I heard her arrive when the glass dish went crashing to the ground. She'd let light into the kitchen. I could see that the whole of Evienne's dress was soaked with drying blood. I could see the patterns beginning to poke out of the collar and climb toward her face. I could see the rivulets of blood that had run down her legs to pool and clot at the top of her shoes. She was crying in a dry, lurching way. "I had to" she told me.

There was a pile of scraps. There were flies. She wasn't enough for him, the way she had been.

"to make me beautiful"

Benjamin's Suicide Note

horriddaydream

Ten days ago, my friend Benjamin committed suicide. I hate to be blunt about it, I hate to admit that I didn't cry over the fact, but here's the deal…we've been closer than close since sixth grade, and we promised if something like this ever happened, that's not how it would be. That was our friendship. We were used to the whole "death won't be an emotional thing, rather, we can look back upon all the awesome things we did." And if anything, the reason why he left the world left me in more of an emotional turmoil leaning toward the horrific side of things, not the depressing side.

When Benjamin and I wanted to keep something confidential but didn't have time to talk it out in person or send it in a text that would take about six messages to get the point across, he would tag me in a 'note' on Facebook which I'm sure most of you are familiar with. If not, it's a place on your personal profile where you can write notes, tag people in them, or keep them to yourself. We would put our settings to private and write to each other about something a teacher did, something that somebody said to us in class, etc. Except we did this even after high school, just to catch up on extensive events.

Ten days ago, I logged onto Facebook, hoping to see a private message from him answering me about wanting to see each other soon, but instead I noticed I was tagged in a private note written by him. It was titled in bold letters "I've been dealing with this for awhile." My heart jumped a bit at the title, thinking that maybe he had done something really bad, maybe gotten a girl pregnant who was bad news, I don't know. My mind raced as I read, and my heart only sunk further as I read on.

"I'm really sorry I didn't call you. I'm really sorry that this is the way that I chose to go, but I can't live with it anymore. When the thing that terrifies you the most comes back to you full force, it's not easy to come to terms with.

Remember when I told you about my dad and how he always seemed to know what I was doing? Remember that one time that I told you he was standing in the hallway on the phone, back turned to me many, many feet away, and I crept out of my room even though I was grounded and wasn't supposed to leave that day? And he threw the phone down and came after me, even though I made no sounds making my escape, I told you it was as if he had seen me try to leave, though there was no possible way? And that one time…he was sleeping on the couch and snoring REALLY loudly, but I swore to CHRIST I heard him whispering at the same time, like an echo, something that would have been impossible. It was the source of my nightmares for a long time.

Well, last weekend I came home for the weekend just to visit my parents and little sister. It's been about three months since I last saw them in person, you know that. Well they went to the grocery store for something with Emily and I was alone in the house, well besides the dog. And I walked out into the hallway coming out of my bedroom, and you know how my parent's room is right across from mine Somebody had left the door open and right inside the doorway was this really weird-looking journal with a shiny black cover that I had never seen before. It was closed with a clasp which I opened, and I know it was wrong, but this thing looked awesome and you know I like my little bit of

adventure.

Inside was messy scrawl, and my father's handwriting. It looked like two people writing back and forth, but I knew it wasn't my mother. It was psychotic. My dad would keep a journal entry about something he did that way…you know what, instead of being erratic here, I'll just show you an example. The first paragraph is something my dad wrote in his handwriting a few days prior, and the second paragraph is the other handwriting.

'Woke up this morning to the same dream. It's been happening for awhile now, so I thought I would write it down just as a way to keep track of how many times it happens. Wife and I are walking on the beach and all of a sudden I start hurting her. I take my fists to her and I have her on the ground, vicious intent in my mind, for some reason I feel like I'm filled with hatred and yet I feel like I could cry when I meet eyes with her and

You stupid fucking whore this is why these things happen to you! You can't shut your fucking mouth what if somebody finds this shit fuck you fuck you fuck you'

I was flabbergasted. I put the journal back on the desk, hands shaking, and I burst out into the hallway and down the stairs, where I put some television on to try and calm my nerves until they were back. I couldn't meet eyes with my father the rest of the evening, no matter how normal things felt. What was my father dealing with? Why did something about him always make me feel so uneasy…my own father?

Well when I came back home from my getaway with my parents, I was taking a shower. I felt uncomfortable doing it in my old house and so I hopped in there and tried to scrub away all the fears I had that weekend, but my hand hit something on the back of my head. I dropped the fucking soap and screamed like a little kid in pain, I'm sure I woke up some people in the apartment building. I know it sounds crazy, but you have to believe me when I say that I felt a blinking eye on the back of my head. It felt like it struggled to open, like it was breaking open for the first time, and then it winced as my finger pushed against it. I felt an enormous pain at the back of my head. When I went to rub my fingers back there again, it was still there, so I panicked and pushed my fingers further downward on my scalp, and there was a mouth there. And a fucking nose, in what felt like the exact same shape as mine. And as I was about to retract my hand, the mouth opened and let out the most terrifying scream, like a baby being born. I tried to cover it up but it fought with me and tried to bite my palm, it was trying to fucking kill me!

I can't do it anymore. Last night I heard it sobbing as I tried to suffocate it with my pillow by laying on my back. I can't go outside, I can't do anything. I refuse to live the life that I suspect my father was living this entire time. I don't know how he kept this from me for so long. But I have to leave this world, and I'm sorry."

I tried to get ahold of Benjamin's parents but it was pointless. Nobody would pick up the damn phone and I feared he was already long gone. I got a phone call that night, a returned call from his father, who was now sobbing and telling me that they had discovered his body in his apartment. A shot to the head that obliterated him and left him 'unidentifiable'. I told them I had wanted to check up on him and hopefully see him soon, but that he wouldn't answer my calls.

Then what his father said next before he hung up the phone and left me to my grief was what sent more

chills up my spine, left so many unanswered questions running laps through my brain. It lives with me now, ten days later, makes it hard to sleep at night. I'm not sure anything will ever take away the pain, or help me sleep again.

"I saw the Facebook note."

And it wasn't even in his father's voice.

March 2014

{A}lzheimer's

nicmccool
Winner - March 2014 Monthly Contest
First Part of a Series

"Dad?" I nudge his shoulder, trying to get his attention. "Dad, can you finish what you were saying?"

He turns back from the window, glassy eyed like the fogged up pane of his hospital room. He stares at me for a long second trying to remember who I am then a tiny upturn at the corner of his mouth. "They have good pie here," he says.

His voice breaks my heart. It's the same voice that read to me before bed, casting me off into an ocean of sleep with his thick baritone as my guide. It's the same smooth sound that made breakups and booboos all better as a kid; the same voice that toasted me at my wedding. "I know, dad. They have good pie." The hospital doesn't actually serve pie. I place a hand on his arm; his forearms are still thick ropes of muscle. "Can you remember what you were telling me?"

"Junior?" His eyes light up, like someone deep inside the black pupils lit the faintest of lanterns. "Junior, how long have you –"

"I've been here awhile, dad. We've been talking." I smile. "You were telling me about Uncle Jon."

A shadow shades his eyes as deep wrinkled brows dip downward. "Why are we talking about that bastard?"

"You were telling me what happened. You were telling me why you two don't talk anymore."

He shakes his head. Frustration. I'm losing him again.

"The diner, dad. You were telling me about the diner. Something about –"

"Every one of them," he says. He pulls his arm away and wipes a dry forehead with the back of his hospital gown. The fog is creeping back into his eyes. "Laying brick ain't for the weak." His hand goes to his shoulder massaging muscles that aren't really sore.

He's almost gone, I think. "Dad, the diner?" I try to guide him back.

The thick southern drawl of his youth surfaces as he talks, "12 hour days, e'ryday. You know that?" I nod, not really understanding. "And we only got paid for eight. But it was enough; plenty in fact."

"Did you work with Jon back then?" I ask, steering him back.

"You hear that, Jon? This boy's askin' if you worked with me!" He's talking over his shoulder to an empty hospital corner. "The only thing you ever lifted was a fork to your damn mouth." He laughs then frowns as a memory slips through.

He's almost gone again. "What happened at the diner? Why did you and Uncle Jon stop talking that day?" I try to turn his shoulders back towards me, but he's still so strong.

He finally turns on his own accord, his head lagging a moment behind still staring at something only he can see. “Listen pal,” he says in a less than cordial tone. “You might wanna keep them hands off me.”

I’ve lost him. “Dad?”

The lantern is back in his eyes, faint and distant, but then puffed out by the fog. “They got any pie today, Jon?”

He’s talking to me, but looking through me at the same time. “No, not today,” I say. I reach down and gather my bag and my phone. I’ve got two missed calls from my wife. I’m already late. “I’m going to go, dad. I’ve got dinner plans at home.” He’s looking back out the window ignoring me. I stand, put on my coat, and walk towards the door. “You want me to say anything to Jon? He’s visiting. I haven’t seen him in years –“

“Why’d you do it?”

I stop, hand on the doorknob. “You want me to ask him –“

He’s staring at me, dark lucidity glowing from his brown eyes. “All those people, Jon. Why?”

I take a few steps towards him. “Dad, I’m not –“

“Were you mad ‘cause they teased you?” His hands are clenched into fists. “They teased everybody!” He’s yelling now, anger in his voice I’ve never heard before. “Maybe if you didn’t make it so easy on them; always eatin’ and never workin’. Maybe if you tried to put in one good day of honest work!”

I can hear the nurses hurrying down the hall. “Dad, what happened? What did Uncle Jon do?”

He bares his teeth, spitting the words at me. “But, poison?! You weren’t even man enough to stand up up to ‘em face to face, you coward!” The nurses are there now, restraining him, pushing him back into his chair. He’s still so strong but the memories seem to suck all that energy from him, draining him of life. “You coward,” he yells again, but the voice is distant, like he’s forgotten why he’s saying those words. “Coward,” he whispers into the window.

The nurses look at me accusingly as they retreat from the room. “Dad?” I cross the room, kneel down, and put a hand on his shoulder. “Dad, what happened?”

He turns towards me; his eyes are the same clarity as the fogged glass behind him. “They have good pie here,” he says. His eyes water and he turns back around. He’s gone.

I kiss his forehead and leave the building. As I’m walking to the car I check my voicemail. “You’re late,” my wife says. “Your uncle’s here early. He brought pie.”

A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L

Good God, Just How Old *Am* I?

6FtAboveGround

As a professional genealogist and local historian, I have come across some weird things in the forgotten pages of history. I first dove into genealogy because I wanted to know where I came from. Not as in, I wanted to know what countries my ancestors immigrated to America from. Rather, as in, I wanted to know where I as an individual came from. My memory begins fourteen years ago, when I was about eighteen years old. Prior to that point in time is complete amnesia.

I remember awakening in a hospital room that seemed too white. I studied my surroundings—the white walls, white drapes, white tile floor, white bed sheets—all the same shade of white, no less. I felt calm, as though all of this were normal. When a nurse came in and noticed I had woken up, she asked me what my name was, how old I was, and where I lived. I knew none of the answers. With a concerned expression, she asked me if I knew what year it was, or if I knew who the president was, or if I knew what state I was in. I continued to draw blanks.

I asked her why my body was so bandaged up. She explained to me that I was in a hospital in Ohio, and I had been struck by a vehicle in a hit-and-run. There had been no identification on my person. They had been waiting for me to come out of my coma for the last three days, hoping I could tell them who I was. I apologized for not being of any help, and then felt silly—as if I had any control over my lack of memory.

As the nurse turned to leave and fetch the doctor, I found myself blurting out, as if my mouth were controlled by another person: “Bramwell Lindemann!”

The nurse faced me. “Bramwell Lindemann? Is that your name?”

I paused. That didn’t feel right. “No, I am pretty sure that’s not my name. I don’t know why I said that.” I knew the name must have meant something to me before the accident, but I didn’t know what.

The doctor came in and examined me. I heard him say, “Caucasian male, approximately eighteen years of age”. After a litany of tests, the doctor contacted the police department to inform them that I was now conscious and speaking. Two officers came and took a very unhelpful statement from me regarding the accident. When they learned of my amnesia, they searched through countless missing person reports, but no matches were found. Though my story was mentioned two nights in a row on the local news, and the anchors asked anyone who recognized my photo to call the hospital and claim me, no one did.

After recuperating in the hospital for a few more days, the staff declared me fit to leave. I wandered out into the street, with no name, no wallet, no money, no home, and no knowledge of my surroundings. They called me John Doe in the hospital, so that is the name I have stuck with since the year 2000.

I lived on the streets for a couple of weeks, then moved into a shelter and secured part-time employment. I soon found a small apartment. I seemed to have an excellent grasp on math, reading, and science—indicating that I had already attended high school. However, with no identity to prove

it, I had to start over. I earned my GED, and then found enough scholarships and student loans to put myself through college. A few years ago, I married the love of my life—Daphne. A true testament to her love for me, she insisted on taking my legal surname, Doe—even at the expense of having a name with goofy alliteration. In climbing the social ladder and building a normal and successful life, I had an advantage over many of the homeless friends I had made in my younger years, in that I didn't seem to have any addictions or major health problems, other than lingering soreness from the hit-and-run.

While I managed well without knowing my true origins, the question always nagged me in the back of my mind. One day, I saw an Internet ad for Ancestry.com. The first name I searched for on that website was the name I had blurted out in the hospital room: "Bramwell Lindemann". No exact hits. There were some results for individuals named "B. Lindemann," but upon further investigation, each of them turned out to be a "Balthasar" or a "Bertha" or a "Bryant". My heart leapt when I found a record for a "Bram Lindeman," but I soon found that this individual's full first name was "Abram".

Once I started, I could not stop. I expanded my research to the offline world, and found myself at the library studying past issues of local newspapers for any clues as to my origins, and going to area schools and looking through nearby high school yearbooks for any photos that resembled me. I became adept at navigating old records, and friends began to ask me to research their family history for them. This turned into a full-time business for me, but I have never stopped searching for my own origins.

I have even taken DNA tests for Y-DNA, mitochondrial DNA, and ethnicity—these tests matched me up with a handful of other users and claim that, based on our DNA similarities, we are approximately sixth cousins or so (indicating that my 5xgreat grandparents, whoever they were, were probably also the ancestors of the other user). However, these DNA databases have never pinpointed a close cousin of mine. Considering that, barring any inbreeding, every person has one hundred twenty eight 5xgreat grandparents (because you have 2 parents, 4 grandparents, 8 great grandparents, 16 great great grandparents, and so on), determining which of these 128 ancestors is the one I share with each of these other users is impossible.

Every so often throughout the years, I have made a post on this or that Internet genealogy forum, asking that if anyone has ever come across a "Bramwell Lindemann" in their research, would they please get in touch with me. I had never gotten a response. In fits of discouragement, I would go back months later and delete these unnoticed posts of mine from the forums.

The humorous irony of someone who doesn't know their own name, let alone their ancestry, becoming an expert on other people's history, has never been lost on my wife, friends, and colleagues.

A month ago, I went out on a limb and made another post to a forum asking about any information on "Bramwell Lindemann". The next morning, I received an email with the title, "Bramwell Lindemann". Though I had just gotten out of bed and had not even had my coffee, every one of my senses became alert in an instant.

The body of the message read as follows: "Dear researcher, I saw on [forum name] that you had inquired about Bramwell Lindemann. In my late grandmother's box of family history documents, there were several photographs with names written on the backs that I have never been able to place. On the back of one of these old photographs is written what seems to be the name 'Bramwell Lindemann,'

although it is written sloppily. I have scanned the photograph and attached the image file to this email. Perhaps this can be of assistance to you, and perhaps you can tell me more about who this man was. My grandmother was born and raised in Vinton, Iowa, so the fellow in this photograph may have also lived there or nearby. Sincerely, [name redacted to protect his privacy]"

My fingers trembling, I clicked the attachment and loaded up the scanned image of the photograph. As the top rows of pixels loaded, I noticed the aged brownish-yellowness of the photo. By the coloring alone, it was probably a hundred years old. The rows of pixels continued to load downward. The man's hair was neat and oiled. As his forehead, then his eyes, then his nose, and his chin came into view, my jaw lowered. It was me. Or rather, someone who looked identical to me. This man could be my great grandfather. The resemblance was mind-blowing.

I replied to the sender, lavishing thanks upon him for sending the photograph. Then, I put down everything and booked a flight to Des Moines for the next day. After arriving in Des Moines, I trekked straight to the Iowa State Historical Society Library and set to work looking for Mr. Lindemann. I first searched all the county death records in Benton County (where the town of Vinton is located) and all surrounding counties for Bramwell Lindemann. It seemed to be a common last name in that area, but no Bramwell Lindemann could be found having died in the area.

I then pulled out case after case of microfilm containing issues of newspapers from Vinton and the surrounding area. I spent hours rolling through issue after issue of microfilmed newspaper, and I began to lose hope. Not much time left until the library closed. That's when I saw it. A small newspaper blurb, buried in a wall of text in a June 1900 edition. The name in the text caught my eye, and wouldn't let go: "B. Lindemann Kills Wife and Child," read the tiny headline.

The article stated: "Bramwell Lindemann, local farmer, 23 years of age, walked into the police station Monday to confess to the murder of his wife of 5 years, Catherine, and their 3-year-old son, Quentin. He stated to police that he revived from a daze to find himself covered in blood and digging through his wife's and son's entrails with a knife. He claimed not to remember what had happened, and no longer remembered his name or who he was, but said he knew he had done something wicked, and set out to find a police station to confess so that justice might be done. Mr. Lindemann was taken under arrest pending further investigation."

Chills ran down my spine. This man from over a century ago, who bore a striking resemblance to me, also suffered from an inexplicable case of amnesia. Perhaps this man really is my ancestor. Perhaps there is some genetic trait I inherited from him that causes these strange bouts of amnesia. However, the fact that Bramwell awoke from his amnesia to find himself mutilating the corpses of his loved ones disturbed me.

I pressed onward through the newspaper editions, finding an article a month later stating that Bramwell had been sentenced to 7 years in the Anamosa State Prison. The judge explained the relatively lenient sentencing as being due to the fact that Bramwell seemed to have committed the act in a moment of temporary insanity and appeared genuinely penitent. I jumped ahead seven years in the old newspapers to 1907, when Bramwell would have been released. Sure enough, there was one miniscule mention of him in the "Local Gossip" section of the paper: "B. Lindemann, formerly of this town, was recently released from Anamosa. In order to try to forget his sordid past, he has opted to legally change his name to Lamar Smith and moved northwest to conduct his farming near the town of

Mallard."

I sat back in my chair, stunned for a moment. I had finally found Bramwell Lindemann, and furthermore, discovered what had become of him. I could not stop just yet. I found the town of Mallard in Palo Alto County and set to work researching that county's records for Lamar Smith. I found him in the 1910 federal census records, his name slightly misspelled. He was a single farmer, and claimed to be only 20 years old. That didn't seem right. He was said to have been about 23 years old when he was arrested in 1900, meaning he was born about 1877. That means he should be about 33 years old in this 1910 census. I went forward a decade and found Lamar Smith in the same area again in the 1920 census, still single, still a farmer. He still claimed to be 20 years old in this census. By now, he should have been 43—there is no way he could have passed for a mere 20. Why was he giving these reports to the census takers? I did not find Lamar Smith in the area in the 1930 federal census records, but there was no record of him dying and being buried in the region either. Again, I returned to the microfilmed newspapers.

Sure enough, I found an edition of an area newspaper from 1925, which read: "LOCAL FARMER'S FAMILY BRUTALLY MURDERED—Ed Anliker, farmer east of town, awoke to a gruesome sight in his home yesterday morning. His neighbor, Mr. Lamar Smith, had stabbed Mr. Anliker's wife and four children to death in their sleep. When Mr. Smith was found, he was consuming the blood and innards of his victims. After being taken into custody by the sheriff, Mr. Smith had no explanation for his actions, and furthermore claimed to have forgotten who and where he was. Mr. Smith has no known relatives in the area. He began farming here nearly twenty years ago, and while neighbors say he is a peculiar man who kept to himself, he was always hailed as a kindly and youthful man, who seems as young today as he is remembered being two decades ago. His crimes bring extreme shock and sorrow to the community."

Below the article was printed a grainy black and white photograph, with the caption, "L. Smith". The man was definitely Bramwell Lindemann, and indeed, it appeared that he had not aged a day.

Pressing onward through the newspapers, I discovered Lamar Smith having been sentenced to 30 years, once again to be served in Anamosa. By now, the library was closing. I got a hotel room in Des Moines for the night, and the next day took a rental car to Anamosa to investigate their old records.

Lamar Smith, it seems, had been released on good behavior after only 25 years. After leaving prison in 1950, he disappeared from the records. I scoured Ancestry.com and NewspaperArchive.com and other research websites. Countless "Lamar Smiths" flooded my results, but one stood out. A 1950 newspaper from Spokane, Washington said that a young local man named Lamar Smith was seen wallowing in the blood of a homeless man he had murdered. When confronted by a passerby, Lamar took on a blank and confused facial expression and ran away. His whereabouts were not known.

At this point, the trail for Lamar Smith went dead cold. I could find no further reference to a Lamar Smith matching what I knew about this man. I took a flight home, feeling defeated. I spent days trying every research method I could think of in order to locate what had happened to Lamar Smith after fleeing the murder scene in Spokane, but I came up empty.

Earlier this week, inspiration struck. A different angle occurred to me. Using specific keywords, I searched newspapers on NewspaperArchive.com for articles about a man who "murdered" and then

suffered “amnesia”. I found one. The article was from a 1975 edition of a Sacramento, California newspaper. The murderer, who gave no name for himself, was described as a transient hippie who had the appearance of being on some kind of drugs, but tested negative for all known drugs. The murderer had wandered into a campground on the outskirts of the city and slaughtered a family of four with his bare hands, then partially devoured some of the remains. He claimed to suffer from amnesia. Next to the newspaper article was a mugshot photograph of the man: bearded, long-haired, shirtless, shoulders draped in stereotypical beaded necklaces…but that face. I pressed my thumb over the beard, and focused on the forehead, eyes, and nose. There was no mistaking it. This man was a twin of Bramwell Lindemann, of Lamar Smith…and of me.

A subsequent issue of the newspaper stated that the hippie killer had been sentenced to 25 years in prison, and had been processed under the temporary name “John Doe,” until his true identity could be ascertained. I contacted the prison and inquired about this John Doe. The institution’s records indicated this man had been released from prison in June of 2000. I requested a copy of the man’s last mug shot, and after much jumping through hoops, finally received it in the mail. John Doe’s last prison mug shot, taken in June of 2000, showed the same man pictured in the 1975 newspaper. He was now clean shaven and had not aged a day. Without the facial hair, he looked even younger than before, if that was possible.

I stared at the photograph. I stared into the mirror. Then back to the photograph. I was looking at a picture not of some random criminal or some ancient ancestor of mine. I was looking at a picture of me, exactly as I looked 14 years ago, at the time of the accident. Exactly as I look right now.

Am I the Sacramento murderer? Am I Lamar Smith? Am I Bramwell Lindemann? If so, then just how goddamn old am I? I had always chalked up my lack of age marks to healthy diet and exercise. What if there is some other power at work? Why can’t I age? What happens to me every 25 years that causes me to commit brutal crimes and then wipe my memory clean? What really transpired before I lost my memory in the year 2000? If I have connected the dots correctly, then what will happen to me in the year 2025? Is my wife safe around me? Do I tell her what I have learned? Am I going crazy?

It seems too surreal to be true, but I have decided I must get to the bottom of this. I must find out where Bramwell Lindemann (where I?) originated. How far can this rabbit hole possibly go? I will keep you updated on what I discover.

Pro-Life

Hall7

Sure, those high school health classes might tell you how to properly use contraception, the basics of what to expect during pregnancy, and how to generally care for a newborn. Hell, for my final I had to carry around for a week one of those mildly-creepy dolls that cried and wet itself. What they didn't tell you in class is that one in five pregnancies ends in miscarriage. Yeah, your mother probably sat you down one day when you were young and told you about your period. Maybe she discreetly left a box of tampons under your bathroom sink. Maybe she was one of the "cool" mothers and took you to the doctor to start you on the pill after you had been dating that one guy for a while. She probably sat down on your bed, a maudlin smile crossing her face as the enormity of her baby girl growing up twinkled bittersweet through her mind. She talked to you about safety and responsibility, of making wise choices, and reminding you how she didn't get to sleep through the night until you were three because you were such a fussy baby. What she didn't tell you is that you were her third try. She didn't say you had two brothers or sisters passed ill-formed and bloody, unviable clumps of cells and false limbs squeezed from her body in that cold, sterile abattoir of a hospital room. Your mother will never tell you this. No mother will tell her daughter this, but statistically there's a good chance it happened. People say new life is a miracle, but the reality is miracles take a bit of practice to get just right.

I met my husband during my sophomore year of college. I was a plain girl, but had dated men on and off since high school. I was no virgin, but you wouldn't catch me putting out on the first date. We suited each other well. He wasn't extraordinarily handsome, but he had the chiseled jawline of Greek statue. He was sentimental and had a soft sweetness about him that instantly endeared him to me. He was not the wild, fun guy that you went on a couple crazy, memorable dates with, but the sort of man you settle down with. He was a finance major, and had a comically overblown New England accent that you think you'd only hear in comedy sketches. He was strong but gentle, and had very close ties with his family. This is the sort of man you meet and know instantly that he was made for fatherhood. Made for raising and taking care of his family, and I loved him for it. After about a month, I invited him over to my apartment with definite plans in my mind for our first time. I had the wine, the candles, the soft jazz. He was very much a romantic, and I thought for sure he'd find it beautiful. After a light dinner and some heavy kissing, I took his hand and began to guide him to my bedroom. He stopped suddenly and released my hand upon realizing what I was implying. He smiled, blushed a little, and told me he was actually waiting for marriage. I knew he was religious -- Catholic in particular -- but I hadn't known he wasthat Catholic. I was raised in a nonreligious family. We weren't any sort of diehard atheist avengers; just that religion wasn't a thing for us. I knew he attended Mass with his family on holidays, but hadn't realized he was such an adherent. I already loved him, so I (not without a little disappointment) respected his wishes.

We continued dating over the next two years, and he got an amazing job offer for a big-name venture capital firm a week before he was to graduate. He took me to meet his family in Massachusetts shortly after graduation, and they were your typical New England bunch. They were well-meaning, but very loud and very Catholic. Again, not in any sort of creepy cult sense, but they had me go to Mass with

them (very long and very boring) and their home was littered with crucifixes and Virgin Marys.

The night before we left, his family had gone out to dinner without us and their house was strangely quiet from the lack of normal raucous banter. He knocked on my bedroom door, and invited me to sit on their deck with him for a while and watch the sunset. He took my hand and led me outside, the fiery summer sun blazing behind the dense forest that backed up against the house. Fireflies spun lazily around us, and he had lit candles all around the deck. I knew instantly what was coming, and burst into joyful tears. He knelt down, and I sobbed my yesses over and over before he could even ask. Upon returning inside, his family burst out of the kitchen and revealed a secret surprise congratulatory party full of finger foods and the "good beeeyuh", as they were prone to call the craft brew they kept for special occasions. It was the happiest moment of my life, and after a bit I excused myself to the relatively quiet living room to use the phone and inform my own family of the news. His mother was sitting calmly in the love seat, alone. She smiled at me warmly, patted the open side of the love seat for me to join her, and asked me to call her "Maaaa" from now on. We sat in comfortable silence for a moment, and then she began to bubble on about the wedding. She knew just the beautiful cathedral; she knew that her priest would absolutely adore me. She paused a moment, realizing that she was already letting her bossy northern spirit get the better of her. She asked if I would prefer my own priest perform the ceremony, and I absentmindedly informed her that I wasn't religious. She blanched, and made a clucking noise with her tongue. I realized my mistake instantly- my now-fiancé had neglected to tell his family he was dating a heathen. She began rattling on about how that wouldn't do, and I'd need to be confirmed and converted and so on. I sighed, and slowly consented. I suppose I could put up with a little nonsense to keep the man I loved happy.

Our wedding was everything I had dreamed it would be. Say what you will of Catholics, but they had magnificent tastes in architecture and the church would have looked appropriate in a fairy tale. Before I could comprehend it all, it was over and I was being whisked away to the seaside cabin in Vermont for the honeymoon. It had been nearly three years since my last sexual encounter, so I was quite looking forward to it. As he was driving, I checked the time and reached into the back seat for my purse. I pulled out the circular card containing my monthly supply of The Pill, and popped today's out of the foil bubble. He nearly wrecked the car when he saw what I was doing, ripping the card out of my hand. He spoke gently and firmly, as was his manner, and told me that I was Catholic now and contraception was a sin. I tried to argue that I worked full time and wasn't ready for a baby. He smiled warmly, taking my hand in his, and told me that I didn't need to work anymore because he would take care of me always. This was true: I hadn't been lucky in the job market after graduation and worked a menial service job, while he was pulling in six figures easily. He kissed my lips gently, reaffirmed how much he loved me, and told me that God's will would see us through as long as we abided His standards. I didn't roll my eyes out of respect for the man I admired, but it was all I could do not to chuckle sardonically.

It didn't take long. His lovemaking was firm yet tender just like his mannerisms. He was comfortably large, and he was surprisingly talented for a 24 year-old virgin, though admittedly I was a bit starved in this area of my life. I loved him, I loved being with him, and I loved the closeness of feeling him inside me. Mother Nature failed to visit me with her red gift the very first month after our wedding. Per my mother's advice, I never trusted the pee-stick tests and went straight to my doctor, who

confirmed the new life growing inside of me. The feeling was wildly bittersweet. I had always wanted to be a mother, but I had wanted more time as just a woman. More time to be alone with the man I adored unbroken by the responsibilities of motherhood. I felt a bit guilty at my reluctance, and after I told him the news and watched warm tears of elation stream down the cheeks of a man I'd never seen cry, I made a promise to myself that I'd never share of my hesitation. He was a good man; he would treat our child well. We would be happy and we would never want for anything as long as we lived.

I was surprised at his vigor on the subject. The next day after telling him, I came home from the grocery store to discover him painting our spare room a pale canary yellow. He had taken off work early, and done a bit of shopping. A beautiful crib that must've cost hundreds of dollars lay in a box on our living room floor, surrounded by an elegant bassinet, utility-sized cartons of diapers, a nursing chair, and a matching changing table. I laughed to myself sarcastically, and teased him that his religious upbringing must've forgotten to mention that babies take nine months to arrive. His face clouded briefly as he set the paint brush down on some newspaper, and I decided to take a more practical, serious approach. I explained that maybe he was jumping the gun a bit, and that perhaps we had better wait a few months before making further purchases. For the first time since I'd known him, he became frustrated. He stammered softly under his breath something about God's will, and continued painting. I knew fatherhood was a big mantle to take on, especially so young, and chalked it up to being his coping mechanism.

During the second month of pregnancy, I began to bleed. At first it was just a crimson kiss in the bottom of my panties, and I didn't think much of it. Toward the end of the first trimester, I went shopping for comfortable maternity clothes with my closest friend Anna. We were having a silly time, trying on preposterous muumuus and clingy maternity yoga pants. Even the petite Anna, a notorious double-zero doomed to shop in the Juniors department for all her life, was getting in on the action and trying on tent-like gowns that absorbed her tiny frame, much to my riotous giggles. I stepped out of the dressing room to model a particularly sultry lace nightie for my friend. The nightie was scandalously red, my swelling breasts desperately held by the sheer satin stitching. The shiny satin embraced my barely-showing stomach, falling just low enough to cover my panties. My friend gasped in amazement as I did a little twirl. I looked at myself in the mirror, and gasped as well. I was always a plain girl, but in this nightdress I was glowing radiantly, sexual and inviting; I was a woman. I felt a pang of regret in my stomach. In a few short months, I would never be this woman again. My body would be bruised, pudgy and streaked with stretch marks. I would trade my silky night garments for practical jeans and sweatshirts stained with finger paints and vomit. I would not get a full night's sleep for years and consequently would develop dark bags under my eyes and never have time for makeup. I felt that pang of regret again in my stomach as I stared at the fading woman in the mirror, the stab more sharp and visceral. The pain hit again, this time a massive cramp and I knew it was not psychological. My friend leapt from the waiting chair and shouted my name. Blood was flowing down my leg, staining the red lace nightie black with the wet.

My husband met us at the hospital, kissing Anna on the cheek and thanking her for staying with me while he drove over from work. She begged me to call her as soon as I knew more, and took her leave. My husband took my hand, firm and gentle as always. A nurse came in, wheeling in an

ultrasound cart. I twitched as she began rubbing the cold gel over my belly, and my husband maintained his firm, warm grip on my hand. The machine hummed to life as she began passing the sensor over me. The staticky screen began to resolve, and I shivered as the face of my unborn child began to coalesce. The eye sockets were too huge. The skull was flattened on top. The nurse frowned and sighed, cutting us a look of hardened pity that I knew she had given hundreds of other unfortunate couples. She advised us to wait a moment, and called in the obstetrician. I didn't need to hear what he had to say. I knew. Those gaping, too-large eye sockets were wrong. The fetus looked like every picture of an alien you'd ever seen. Tiny mouth, eyes too big for the face, dented almond head. The doctor buzzed tonelessly in the background of my mind. Ancephaly. Unviable. Terminate next week if you like. You might think I would cry, bawl and weep until my eyes were too dry to make tears. All I felt was… relief. I thought of that sexy lace nightie. I thought of my husband finding me beautiful still as he pushed inside me, looking at my face and not imagining some movie star whore as we made love. I could still be... A woman. I felt disgusted with myself, perhaps guilty, but this was overwhelmed by the calm relief of a fate averted. My husband roused me from my stupor by his shouts. The ever-calm man was yelling at the doctor. He was shrieking with rage that we would never abort our baby, murder, sin, God's will. Always God's will. My heart shrank. The doctor, perhaps understanding grief, did his best to calm my husband down and took his leave, sending the nurse back in to clean me up and collect the ultrasound machine. As she began removing the sensors, my husband made a request that chilled me to my core. He asked for an ultrasound print of his son.

I feigned depression for the next couple of days. The vastness of my relief left me elated, but I could never let my husband know my secret respite. For his part, he carried on happily and with utmost normalcy. Again, I assumed this was his coping mechanism. I couldn't share this with anyone, neither my friends nor family, not even my own mother. This terrible, silent joy; this burden that was not a burden. I awoke one morning to the sound of hammering and heady fumes. Slipping into my robe, I stepped out of our bedroom. The door to the spare room that would've been our nursery was wide open. The canary yellow had been replaced by a soft powder blue. My husband was in the living room, sweaty and shirtless. The open tool chest, the open boxes, the frame of a half-built crib; it was too much for me. I asked him bitterly what he was doing. He turned to me, and chuckled as he apologized for waking me up. We had a lot of work to do, he reminded me with sincerity in his firm, gentle tone. The baby would be here in just a couple months. A sour note of anger flared in my throat as I stormed from the room. Grieving, I know, is a process, but this could not possibly be healthy. He chased after me, taking me by the hand and pulling me effortlessly against his bare chest. He kissed me softly, eyes gleaming. I felt wetness pooling in the corners of my eyes as purest pity for my lover welled within me. I touched his carved, glorious chin and told him it would be okay. I told him we would get through this. I told him it wasn't anyone's fault; these things happen. I looked downward, unable to meet his gaze, lying as I told him we could try again. I told him I had set the date for termination three days from now, and that I hoped he would come with me to be my support. The words had barely left my tongue when he ripped my hand away from his face. His grip was hard, cold, and painful. He dropped my hand wordlessly, walking into the kitchen. He considered the contact list posted by the phone, and dialed. My jaw went slack and my blood ran cold as he greeted my obstetrician and cancelled my termination appointment.

I wanted the thing out of me. I wanted it gone. The ill-made creature growing inside of me, touching

me, moving sluggishly as it mindlessly crafted its flawed form from my own flesh, quickening toward the outside air of which it would never breathe. My husband framed the ultrasound print and set it facing us on our dresser. The inhuman features implacably staring, ever-watching as we slept. At first I begged him to let me terminate. He was firm, solid, almost condescending in his strong-but-soft tone as if I was a silly child longing for a second helping of dessert. Reluctantly, I let it be. I knew this was hard for him. Despite the wretchedness of the situation, I loved him and wanted to comfort my mate through this challenge. I resolved to reach term, though my spirit curdled at the thought of passing the misshapen form with brains leaking from the incomplete skull, maladjusted entrails sloshing about, and those dark, swollen, lidless eyes. The eyes were the worst in my mind, a cartoon caricature of some boogie monster, inhuman and lifeless. I decided that, like an open coffin funeral, once my husband saw the truth of reality he would abandon his now-macabre fantasies. He grew cheerier as the days passed. The baby room was complete, even a cheerful mobile danced above the crib with a melancholy mechanical tune that made me shiver. A room more mausoleum than nursery.

I grew large and heavy, my body feeling awkward and cumbersome as if I was a spirit possessing some stranger's form . My husband took some time off work to care for me, as I was unwieldy and unaccustomed to being so heavy. On one afternoon, as I was taking my second or third nap of the day, I heard the front door opening and closing, voices spilling down the hall. The bedroom door opened and my mother burst in, having made the trip up from my native Florida. She helped me into a maternity gown and walked me down the hall. Cheers erupted as I gazed upon every woman I even vaguely knew. My mother, my two aunts, my cousin, Anna along with several friends and my college roommate, even my mother-in-law stood amongst powder blue streamers and balloons savagely strewn across the living room. My husband waved as he dismissed himself out the door, leaving the ladies to their party. My baby shower. The shock wore off and I burst into tears, which my guests mistook for hormones instead of horror. Presents lined the coffee table, and they had even purchased one of those mommy-tummy shaped cakes which I had always found distasteful. I put on a brave face, hollowly following along with the obligatory party games. I cut the cake, expertly frosted with smooth, flesh-colored fondant concealing a red velvet interior. In the middle of the cake was a marzipan fetus, too-pale and with sinister black sugar eyes. Feeling every bit of strength drain from me as my mother set the candy baby on my plate, I slowly cut it into bite-sized pieces and consumed it as applause went up from around the room. What a hideous good-luck tradition.

It was time for presents and I gathered all my courage as I began unwrapping things that I would never use. Diapers that no baby would soil. Bottles that would never feel an infant's lips. Pastel blue onesies adorned with sickeningly-saccharine phrases that would never keep a child warm. Anna's present was last. Unlike the other presents which were without exception wrapped in the typical "It's a boy!" blue, hers was wrapped in ruby paper with svelte black ribbons. I gingerly undid the ribbons and pulled apart the package. Deep-red sheer lace spilled into my lap. I began to tremble, knowing exactly what Anna had purchased me. I bit my lip drawing blood, feeling an anger I never knew I possessed well up within me. My mother, seated beside me, whipped the nightie from my grip and held it up for the ladies to see. Chuckles and wolf whistles erupted from the ladies. I was seething, and I screamed. A wordless, black scream echoing from my weary, ruined heart. I felt it. I felt it and grew instantly silent. A flutter, a flutter, then a kick. The creature inside me was stirring. I had roused it with my scream. I stumbled gracelessly from my chair, knocking presents and plates of half-eaten

hors d'oeuvres about, toppling the brutally caesarean-sectioned belly cake to the floor. I tottered as if drunk. I had to escape, I had to get away. I had to get this thing out of me right now, at any cost. Damn my husband's love, damn his principles. The unborn monster was squirming madly, and I felt the bile rise in my throat. Dropping to my knees, I emptied my stomach onto the kitchen floor. I looked down dizzily at my mess, shuddering at the wet marzipan arm, fingers intact, protruding from the shapeless flesh-colored pool of vomit. The room spun, and darkness overcame me.

I awoke in the hospital, my legs spread and strapped into risers. My husband was at my side in scrubs and a medical mask over his mouth as a doctor readied himself in the corner. I pulled my hand from his firm, gentle grip in disgust as I saw the mask slightly rise with a concealed smile. He took my hand again and whispered reassuring phrases about our son coming soon, our son couldn't wait and so he's a little bit early, aren't you excited to meet our son? The realization dawned upon me as the area between my legs split with a searing pain. I shrieked and struggled instinctually, but the doctor's seasoned voice calmed me down. The pain came in terrible pulses, like a knife being pulled in and out and in and out of my womanhood. I could feel a sickening wriggling in my belly, a sensation worse than any pain. I heard the doctor issuing commands: breathe, breathe, push. Good, breathe, breathe, push. I felt a pressure building behind my cervix, something slippery and unpleasant spilling down, kicking and filling and violating what had previously only ever been the sacred domain of my lovers. The writhing stopped, the loathsome movement stilled. I knew in that moment that the abominable false life within me had ceased, and I laughed. The darkest, most shameless sound ever heard in all the years of humanity spilled from my lips: the collective, haughty, deathless laughter of Lilith and Jezebel and Bathsheba. I felt the prick of a needle down below followed by the dulled tear as the doctor skillfully slit my entrance wider to allow the passage. I pulled the blinder erected around my waist down. I wanted to see it; I wanted to see this dead horror birthed into the world. I wanted to see the look on my husband's face, to savor his terror and brokenness as he realized the true face of what he had forced upon me. The doctor warned me that I should look away, but I was resolved.

The pain became a dull sensation in the back of my mind. I was steel; I was the implacable will of every woman who came before me. I breathed and I breathed and I pushed and I pushed, and then an arm breached from out of me. The fingers were fat, slippery, and fused together like a mitten of flesh, the pink starting to fade to the bluish-purple of the grave. The doctor rotated the fetus still inside me, pulling as I pushed. The head burst free, and I shuddered as I took in the flattened dome. The skull was open and unfused, and I could see the violet jelly that should've been a brain laced by stringy, matted strands of black hair. It had no neck, even less than no neck- the squat head jutting abruptly from the formless torso. The doctor maneuvered the fetus again, allowing me to see those terrible, lidless eyes. They took up two-thirds of what should've been a face, almost comical in their failure to resemble a human's features, fully black, bulging out of the incomplete skull. The nose was a puddle, a lump of skin with two pinholes. The mouth a thin gash cut ear to ear. So much for having its father's chin, I bleakly mused. I could hear my husband's mad praises, babbling about how beautiful our son was, how wonderful this moment was. I felt the doctor pull the rest of the stillborn form from me. The doctor's bespectacled eyes were solemn as he wrapped the corpse in a towel and pitied my husband's manic bleating. I surveyed my ruined body, crisscrossed with stretch marks and pillowed with hideous rolls of once-taut skin now darkened by bruises. My lower half was a messy pastiche of

blood and piss and shit and the yellow-brown stains of Betadine. I laughed again over my husband's fevered murmurings of God's will and miracles of birth and how much he loved this family. I could fix all this. I could still be a woman. They could clean me up and stitch me up and tummy tuck and makeup and, God's will be damned, I would look so fucking sexy in that lacey red satin nightie. And then my baby cried.

The reality is miracles take a bit of practice to get just right.

Unknown Cargo

jdpatric

In the early 90's I was a deck hand on a ship that frequented the southern half of the globe. We mainly transported goods, occasionally passengers, and sometimes things that we weren't allowed to see. Once in a while we'd see something we weren't supposed to. The guy who got me the job lost his life in one such incident; a large wave had rolled our ship hard to the port side and caused our below deck cargo to shift violently. The strapping holding down a particularly heavy box gave under the strain and let the box go. It slid into the wall revealing a large quantity of ivory and other illicit goods. He left the hold as soon as he saw what it was, but he was found dead later that same day crushed by another "loose box." They neglected to mention that he was also shot in the head on the official report. This was one of the incidents that made me quit…one, not 'the.'

The last time I set foot on that ship was 1993.

The long and short of our journey is that we were headed from Buenos Aires, Argentina, to Puerto Montt, Chile. It was easier to sail around Cape Horn than it was to find a reliable passage through the Andes. I don't know much about the client, but he hired our ship and paid us a fat bonus so that he could fill out the paperwork instead of us. This entails certain risks when entering port cities…but it gave our client a greater degree of anonymity. Some people pay quite well for that.

The seas around Cape Horn can be some of the most treacherous on the planet. They're certainly the worst I've ever seen. Due to the fact that there is so little land that far south the winds can whip around nearly the entire planet past 40° south creating the "roaring 40's, the furious 50's, and the screamin' 60's." These sound like neat names to most people…to me they mean we're in for a rough ride. Cape Horn forces ships to drop below 56° S. The further south you go the worse the winds can get. We were aiming for a course around 56.5° S. This put us a little further off shore, hopefully out of reach of anyone who'd want to inspect/steal our cargo, yet still close enough to land that we'd have a chance to make it if a storm hit hard and fast.

The journey was uneventful until we approached the Cape. My job on the ship was one that everyone can associate with; I was the cook. I didn't have any particular area of expertise aside from a friend (since deceased) who had told them that I made the best food out of the crappiest ingredients and that I wouldn't rat them out. I am a good cook, and I had no plans on ratting out a less-than-noble captain/crew who would ultimately kill me if I did so. We were about 50 miles off the shore on the night we'd be passing the cape when things got…odd? I don't suppose that's quite right…they went straight stupid; it was my last voyage for a good reason. Things I can't rightly explain began to happen.

When you're at home and something happens inside your house, such as a fire, you leave. You go outside, and you watch the thing burn down or you see if you can put it out. That's not really an option at sea. You put the fire out or you jump ship and risk death. The fires we had to put out weren't the kind I'm used to. It was winter and the winds were bad as soon as we passed 40° S. They got worse the entire way down. There were thirteen of us on the ship. A horrible number, but no one had yet

been hired to replace my buddy.

I didn't actually know any of the real names of my fellow crewmates; nor did they know mine. That being said I'm not willing to risk naming them as I knew them...lest they find me. I'll refer to the captain as 'Karl.' He was in his mid 50's and was the only person still on board who I really got along with. The pay was good so I stayed. He'd often ask me to take watches late at night as I had no other real obligations at that time unless it was very early (4-5 am ship time). On the night we passed the Cape I was on one such watch around 8:00 pm. It had been dark for over two hours and since it was winter I knew there was a real threat of icebergs in this area. I spotted the first almost immediately and alerted the mate who was in the wheelhouse. I honestly don't remember which one it was because immediately I saw more and more icebergs and we realized that we'd stumbled into an ice floe. This kind of phenomenon didn't regularly occur this close to the Cape, but it'd happened in the past…the only problem was that we'd need to go shallower or deeper to avoid it…we went deeper.

Once we were a few miles further out than the floe the wind picked up in a bad way. I couldn't go outside anymore for fear of being blown overboard. The waves were in excess of 30 feet, and even some of the crew (those still awake) was starting to feel sick. Our ship was fairly sizeable; 400 feet, but 30 foot seas are nothing to be trifled with. My inside watch path took me through the forward part of the ship; away from the crew quarters and around the hold. We had a set route for this and I always followed it to a "T;" never lingering in the hold lest I see something that I wasn't supposed to. Well, this time…it didn't really matter. Just before I got to the hold I heard an alarm claxon that I'd only heard twice before; it damn near blew my eardrums, but it meant that there was a massive wave approaching. I grabbed the railing and held on expecting a large breaker or something of the like. I could suddenly feel the bow of the ship begin to rise and I felt myself being pulled backwards down the long corridor I'd just walked. I began to worry when it just kept going up. Finally, mercifully, the wave broke and our ship crashed down and through it. I wasn't on deck to see, but I'd imagine we were briefly partially submerged. The impact was a relief, but it nonetheless threw me to the ground.

When I got up I was dizzy. I'd hit the railing and the ground pretty hard and could see a small bit of crimson on the ground where I'd lain. I'd cut the right side of my head…not bad, but it bled nonetheless. That's when I first saw something. It was standing at the end of the hallway that led to the deck of the ship. It looked like a person, and I expected them to come help me up and make sure I was OK. The crew may not have been all buddy-buddy, but you want your fellow crewmates to make the journey…if nothing else so that you don't have extra work to do. I was still dizzy and a little woozy, but I could clearly see a figure open one of the outside doors and calmly step onto the deck. This couldn't be happening. No one had any reason to go outside. None. Everything we needed to do (adjustments to the ship, checking cargo, etc. could be done via passageways inside the ship.

Our ship had a two way intercom system. I knew the nearest speaker was in the hold so I reluctantly entered to let the mate at the helm know that one of the crew was outside and apparently had a death wish. When I entered the hold I noticed that it was eerily empty; then I recalled that our current client had contracted us to haul only his cargo. I made for the intercom only to stop dead in my tracks a few feet from it; the cargo had consisted of one large cargo container, the kind that can be loaded onto a flatbed truck. Only…it had broken free of its moorings and slammed into the heavy wall we all

referred to as “the breaker.” It was a very thick wall designed to protect the aft compartment from yielding in the event the cargo became dislodged…as it had today. The container had split and was awkwardly crumpled against “the breaker.” I wasn’t about to witness precious gold spill onto the floor…followed shortly by my own blood if our client had anything to say about it…and was ready to run when I realized…the container was empty. I could see all the way to the back of the container, and there was nothing inside at all.

I ran to the intercom and screamed that someone had gone outside and went to leave the room when something about the container caught my eye. There were crosses painted all over it. Every side had at least one cross on it and the doors had one apiece. I stepped just a little bit closer to examine it and I noticed the interior. It was covered in claw marks. The hinges of doors on the inside had nearly been clawed clean off and there were deep gouges in the heavy metal that looked almost like someone had made them with a torch. My first thought was that we were hauling some sort of big cat to a millionaire for his personal pet collection until I realized how foolish it was to think that a cat could claw through metal.

Suddenly I heard the alarm claxon for the second time in so many minutes and realized that I needed to brace myself in a hurry. I ran for the door and the railing but I was too late; this wave didn’t hit us straight on, whoever was in the wheelhouse hadn’t seen it coming and must have done his best to turn us into it…but failed. The ship listed hard to the port side. I hit the floor like bug on a windshield and rolled about 20 feet. I heard the captain calling over the intercom that we’d taken water in one of our aft compartments. This had happened in the past and wasn’t all that surprising, but the fact that the captain had taken over the ship this late at night (it was now after 11 pm) meant that we were in pretty bad shape. I took a quick stock of my surroundings and our emergency protocol for situations such as these and realized something…I was completely alone. No one else on the ship would be within 100 yards of my current location.

That’s when I heard the wind howling louder than I’d ever heard it before. Somewhere nearby there was something open to the outside. I ran from the cargo hold and noticed the door that I’d seen the person walk out was suddenly open again. I ran down the hall and grabbed the door to shut it, but found it incredibly hot. The door handle burnt through my gloves and caused them to briefly smoke. I ripped my jacket off and used it to turn the heavy duty handle and finally seal the door. Over three inches of water now coated the floor. It would drain, but I still was left with the uncomforting thought that there was some person (or people) on board that I probably wasn’t supposed to know about… and he or she was now loose.

I decided to take the long way around the hold to avoid any unnecessary meetings with our guest(s). This took me to the extreme bow of the ship. It was a somewhat cramped passageway that I’d only used two or three times prior, but we all knew about it. This passage was our way avoiding the hold at all costs; it had only two doors and didn’t connect directly to the hold. Very near the turning point where the path doubled back I looked out one of the portholes and could see the worst seas I’d ever been in. It was almost as if some higher power was trying to sink our ship. I stared out the window watching the waves grow larger and larger, almost as if in a trance, for about fifteen minutes before I realized how long I’d been standing there. Then I saw a trifecta of monster waves rushing at our ship from three different directions. From what I could see there was a 30’ or better wave approaching

each side of the ship, and a monster of at least 50' coming at us straight on. I heard that massive alarm claxon again and this time there was an announcement with it; "Hold on boys. This is gonna be bad."

The waves didn't hit us all at the same time…if that was some sort of mercy. The port wave struck first and pushed us into the starboard wave which actually worked to right the vessel somewhat. The captain didn't mess around; he was good at his job. The last wave was the biggest I've ever seen. If I hadn't been there to see it I'd never have believed it. There was probably a five second break before it hit us and it hit hard. I was already well braced, thankfully, but I could hear metal being wrenched and sheared on deck. There was going to be damage. I looked up and out the window again only to see our onboard crane rushing towards it. I suddenly felt the temperature around me rise sharply and before the crane hit the window everything went black.

I woke on the floor about twenty feet from a gaping wound in the front of the ship. The main crane had broken free from its base and gouged a hole at least ten feet tall in the hull; I couldn't see below my deck to see its true depth. I could feel the warmth escaping the hallway through the opening and realized that, while the outside temperature was in the low 30's, the interior temperature had to have been over 100° F when the crane struck. The power had gone out all around me…I could only hope it was a localized event; if the ship lost power then we'd flounder in short order in these seas.

I suddenly had the unsettling feeling that I was not alone. I jumped to my feet and felt my way along the wall opposite the way I'd come. Suddenly I felt the temperature rise again and my mind immediately went to fire. Fire on a ship was bad. I knew that. This was worse. I made the mistake of looking back and I could see a dark figure on the other side of the crane wreckage that was completely cloaked in fire. But this fire shed no light. It only created heat. I took a step back and suddenly the area in front of me exploded with heat…the figure stood directly in front of me. It was at least seven feet tall, and didn't walk like a person. Despite the incredible heat, I was completely frozen.

Another massive wave shook me from my stupor and I ran. I ran like I'd never run before. But I could still feel the heat right behind me. I finally reached the front commons of the ship and saw that the rest of the ship still had power. I also saw that there were deep scorch marks in my jacket. I looked behind me through the heavy door leading to the hold and didn't see anything but black. I needed to alert the captain. As if the storm wasn't bad enough, our cargo didn't seem to be of this world. I had no intention of returning to the hold area, so I'd be using the galley intercom to reach the captain.

I went down the first flight of stairs I could find and made a straight line for the galley. About halfway there the power flickered. The emergency lights were all floor based and offered very little help except that I wouldn't run full speed into a wall. As I turned the last corner before the galley the power went out completely. The emergency lights gave off their orange glow and illuminated the bottom foot or so of the path. Once my eyes adjusted to the darkness I looked down to the galley, and to my horror I saw a large dark figure pause, then enter the galley through the exact door I was headed to. I had no wish to run into what/whoever that was, but I didn't really have much of a choice; the bow of the ship was heavily damaged, and if we took too many waves through that gaping wound we'd eventually begin to flood. Forgetting the fact that there was something on board that I couldn't rightly explain.

I made my way to the galley door and paused to listen in the galley. I couldn't hear anything over the

sound of the raging storm outside. I inched my way inside and felt along the wall until I was at the intercom. The intercom system had a battery supply that would activate upon power loss. I hit the button and asked for the captain. I heard only static. After several seconds that felt like hours I heard a mate I'll refer to as Omar say "Who are you? Where are you? Karl is hurt. The ship is damaged, what has happened?" I identified myself and he relayed that Karl had fallen after the trio of large waves and broken his arm. The last thing I heard was that we couldn't turn further inland because the storm got far worse when we did…with a pop, that message faded to static that I was unfamiliar with and I heard a voice I didn't recognize broadcast across the intercom system. You will all die.

I felt my hair stand on end. The voice was not only over the intercom system…but also just inches from my face. I scrambled backwards and felt an insane heat grow from the galley. It had used the intercom I was actively using to transmit that…as far as I could tell to the entire ship. I ran to try to get back to the stern of the ship…where I knew there'd be other people. I ran full speed through the darkness and stumbled directly into a ladder well leading down to the next deck. I caught myself at the last second, but not before wrenching my ankle and banging my head (yet again) into the hard metal. I knew it wasn't broken, but I could feel shooting pain in my foot with every step and I began to limp hard. I jumped down the ladder well and followed the dim emergency lights towards the main crew area. The first intercom I came to didn't help much; no one responded to my pleas for help. I finally made my way to the bridge and found no one. There was a little blood on the floor, but no crew.

I looked out the windows and into the driving storm to see a small blinking light off to the side of the ship. The crew had taken the lone lifeboat and left me on board. I tried to radio to the lifeboat but the radio did nothing but crackle. Finally the lights on the bridge began to flicker as well. I was going to die. The thing had finally caught me. I had almost given up when I realized that I did have one last resort; we had survival suits stored in the hold of the ship. If I could make it there I might have a chance. Not a great one, but at least a chance in the frigid waters. The only way there would be on the surface of the ship. I ran to the door leading out of the bridge and tore it open.

The wind was terrible, it was driving sleet and snow all over the ship. It wasn't quite cold enough to outright freeze the saltwater, but precipitation was a different story. I ran as best I could on my hobbled leg and in the horrible weather, covering the distance from stern to bow in about a minute. The outside lights were still operating but I could see the bridge flicker and go dark after a few seconds. I needed to hurry.

I opened the door leading to the hold and found it too warm; something was wrong. The lights were still on, but the temperature was just too high. I ran towards the rear of the hold to get to the emergency suits only to see water rush in from the open door. More water than there should have been. Too much water. I suddenly found myself floating and swimming in frigid water. It filled the room and then I saw up at the ceiling gasping for breath. I felt the ship move again and I was thrown towards the wall. That was the last thing I remembered.

I woke on the table of our ships doctor staring into a bright light. He was looking away from me when I woke, and I struggled to form the words to speak. He noticed I was up and informed me that something strange had happened on board. The power in the forward section of the ship had been lost in the storm, but the stern and engines remained fully operational. I had been found soaked in sea

water in a survival suit running an incredibly high fever convulsing on the floor of the cargo hold. I'd taken a good shot to the head and probably had a concussion. I began to finally relax. I went back to my room with orders to rest and the crew would figure out food for themselves that night. I made it all the way back to my room when I realized that I'd forgotten my jacket at the doctors. I opened the door and grabbed it from the table and made my way back to my small room. As I laid down to sleep I remembered that my jacket had been burnt and I absentmindedly turned my jacket around to make sure that there weren't claw marks or scorches on it. Nothing. As I threw it on my chair it turned inside out revealing a massive scorch in the shape of the door handle and a sizeable claw mark scorched onto the inside…exactly where it would have been if the jacket was on inside out. I had to check the hold.

I made for the front of the ship in a hurry. The hold was warm like it had been earlier, the crane was undamaged on the surface and the storm hadn't abated much. I entered the hold and saw the cargo container. Crosses were painted on every side still…but it was wedged in place as always. Properly secured and unopened. I breathed a sigh of relief and went to go back to my room. I suddenly heard a voice over the intercom…a familiar one this time…I'm still here. I looked back to the container in time to see the power flicker on, revealing a large black figure standing in front of the container. The power almost immediately went back out and I was left dumbstruck.

I ran back to my room, threw the jacket out the window and locked the door, for what that was worth. I made excuses to the captain and crew to avoid the front of the ship the rest of the journey. It wasn't hard. Once we arrived at Puerto Montt I informed the captain that I was quitting. I found overland transport back to home and never looked back. I saw it the entire way home out of my peripheral vision. I could see shadows moving with the truck, or when we'd be on a small boat I'd see things in the water. Once I got home I found a job cooking in a small restaurant and kept to myself. After about eight months I never saw it again.

I was then contacted by an insurance agency. My old ship had sunk. They had taken the journey around Cape Horn one too many times and were hit by a trio of waves that rolled the vessel. It almost righted itself, but the main crane had torn free and gouged a large hole in the front of the vessel. This let water in rapidly and flooded the port side of the ship. It never recovered. All hands were at sea except for the captain. He was found in a survival suit clutching a crucifix that he commonly wore around his neck. He was still alive when they found him…but he was burnt over 60% of his body. He mumbled the Lord's Prayer until they put him in an induced coma to recover from the burns at the hospital. He never came out…dying less than a full day later. The ship has never been accurately located, though the best estimates put it significantly off course. The last proper coordinates read below 60° S. They were closer to Antarctica than to South America.